



Syria: no end in sight?

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Summary

In summer 2012, the tempo of the Syrian conflict suddenly appeared to quicken. After long months during which many predicted a stalemate between the two sides, a bomb killed some of the Syrian government's top security personnel, the authorities appeared to be losing control of much larger areas of the country, and more senior figures defected, including the Prime Minister.

Syria's background in ethnic and sectarian divisions and its history of extreme instability have created the conditions for the present bloodshed. Syria's opposition, too, is divided and unstable; this has been one of the obstacles to the outside world providing assistance to the opposition.

This paper describes Syria's sectarian and political history, and discusses the forces involved in the conflict. It considers the role played by other countries in trying to influence the course of events and points up the many obstacles to effective intervention. Lastly, it looks at some possible outcomes. The paper does not give a running commentary on the conflict itself. Information about opposition forces, both military and political, inside Syria and about the remaining strength of the loyalist forces is difficult to come by and such as is available will not remain accurate for very long.

Ben Smith

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1 Introduction and summary timeline

In January 2011, President Ben Ali of Tunisia resigned. The next month saw the Yemeni president announce that he would not seek re-election and, most importantly, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt stand down. Throughout these tumultuous months, the Syrian leadership, sitting atop a political system that was at least as stultified as these dictatorships, maintained that the Arab uprisings would not happen in Syria. The Syrian leadership was close to its people.

March 2011 saw peaceful demonstrations spread across Syria, calling for democratic reforms and it quickly became apparent that regime of Bashar al-Assad was anything but close to ordinary Syrians, as tanks were sent in to try to stop the demonstrations. While some talked of a stalemate, the conflict gradually became more and more violent and the opposition became radicalised and increasingly characterised by religious sects.

In summer 2012, the tempo of the Syrian conflict suddenly appeared to quicken. After long months during which many predicted a stalemate between the two sides, a bomb killed some of the Syrian government's top security personnel, the authorities appeared to be losing control of much larger areas of the country, and more senior figures defected, including the Prime Minister.

Syria's background in ethnic and sectarian divisions and its history of extreme instability have created the conditions for the present bloodshed. Syria's opposition, too, is divided and unstable; this has been one of the obstacles to the outside world providing assistance to the opposition.

While the suffering of ordinary Syrians has been immense, it is the implications of the rebellion for the stability of the whole region that has preoccupied both factions on the United Nations Security Council. The US and Russia and their respective allies on the council both have an eye to firstly the costs of instability and secondly to their potential strategic gains and losses, depending on the survival or otherwise of the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

This confrontation on the Security Council has led to repeated failures to act and contributed to the exasperated resignation of the Special Envoy, Kofi Annan.

The Syrian government is very well armed, compared with the opposition, and outside military intervention is still unlikely at this stage, because of practical and political obstacles. The Assads' reliance on a minority group has, paradoxically, made it much more difficult to for the opposition to dislodge them than was the case in Egypt, where the deposed president was from the country's mainstream. Many of the defections from the government have been by Sunnis and most assessments conclude that the Alawite core of the security forces is still intact, and capable of fighting on for some time.

If, as some suspect, the Russians and Iranians are now increasingly worried about the threat to their future reputations posed by their support for al-Assad, they may move to try to remove the Assads from power and install a Sunni successor. The alternatives to some such managed transition are grim. If the supply of equipment to the opposition remains relatively restricted, the present level of conflict could go on for a very long time. There may be a full civil war as the opposition becomes increasingly well armed, but it would probably still take a long time for the government to fall. If the government does fall, inter-communal revenge may bring the worst of Iraq and Lebanon to Syria. The Alawites may try to hold on only to their traditional heartlands, forming some sort of Alawite state. But the stability of any such entity would be questionable; Sunni Syria would probably try to retake the area.

As well as the failure to establish a firm legal basis for intervention at the UN Security Council, the practical difficulties and cost of any military action are holding outside powers

back. However, as the possibility of collapse in Syria becomes more realistic and attention turns to Syrian chemical weapons, intervention may become unavoidable. As violence increases and sectarianism becomes entrenched, it is difficult to envisage a successful outcome. The Assad government is likely to be able to survive for some time, given the superiority of its firepower.

This paper describes Syria's sectarian and political history, and discusses the forces involved in the conflict. It considers the role played by other countries in trying to influence the course of events and points up the many obstacles to effective intervention. Lastly, it looks at some possible outcomes. The paper does not give a running commentary on the conflict itself. Information about opposition forces, both military and political, inside Syria and about the remaining strength of the loyalist forces is difficult to come by and such as is available will not be accurate for very long.

1.1 Summary timeline

- Syrian nationalists declare an independence from the French mandate in **1941**.
- Last French troops withdraw in **1946**
- Three coups d'état in **1949** end with the imposition of a military government led by Brigadier al-Shishakli.
- **1970** - Hafez al-Assad comes to power in the eighth coup since French withdrawal.
- The Muslim Brotherhood claims responsibility for an assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad in **1980**; some 550 imprisoned members of the Brotherhood are allegedly killed in revenge.
- In **1982**, a violent anti-government campaign by the Muslim Brotherhood, based in the city of Hama, is put down with great brutality by the government, leading to anywhere between 8,000 and 30,000 deaths.
- **2000** – Hafez dies and new president Bashar al-Assad announces the release of 600 political prisoners, including Islamists and communists and the control of the press is relaxed somewhat.
- In **2011**, massive street protests against the government start.¹ Protests in Damascus and the southern city of Deraa. Security forces shoot a number of people dead, triggering days of violent unrest that steadily spread nationwide over the following months.
- 2011 **August** – US President Barack Obama and allies call on President Assad to step down.
- **November** 2011 – Russia and China veto a UN Security Council Resolution on Syria
- **2012** February - Russia and China block a UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria, The UN says that more than 7,500 people have died since the security crackdown began.

¹ Chronology based on *A Political Chronology of the Middle East, Europa, 2001* and *Europa World Yearbook, Syria, History*, and [Syria profile: Timeline](#), *BBC News Online*, 7 January 2011

- 2012 **March** - UN Security Council endorses non-binding peace plan drafted by UN envoy Kofi Annan.
- 2012 **May** - More than a hundred people killed in Houla, near Homs, most of them women and children. France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada and Australia expel senior Syrian diplomats in protest
- **July** – Russia and China veto another Security Council Resolution
- **August** 2012 – Kofi Annan resigns as special joint envoy to Syria

2 Background

2.1 Religious and ethnic groups in Syria

Syria's total population (according to an official estimate in 2010) is 23,695,000.² The major ethnic groups are Arabs, who constitute some 90%; and Kurds, who constitute about 9% and are almost entirely Sunni Muslim. There are also small numbers of ethnic Armenians, Circassians and Turkmen.

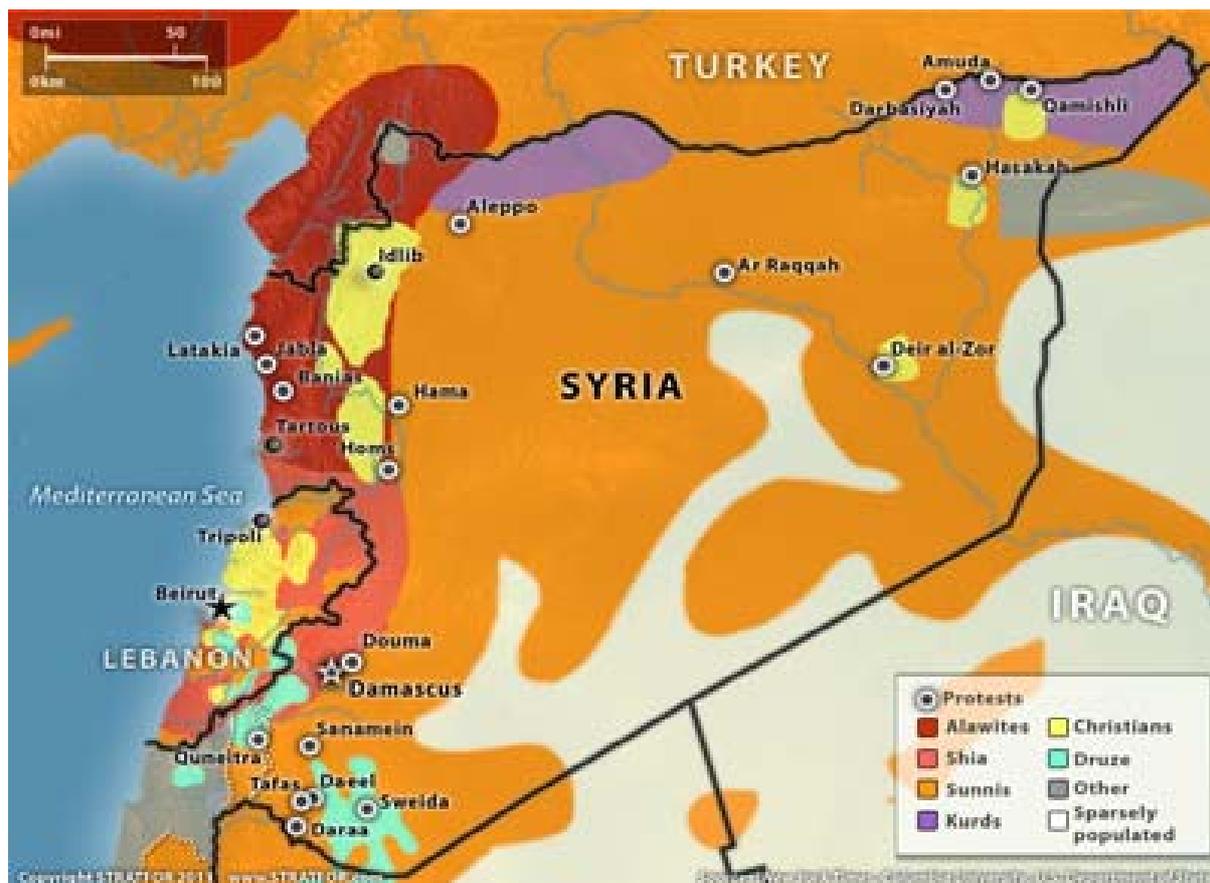
The religious groups of Syria cut across the ethnic groups. Some 74% are Sunni Muslims (Arabs and Kurds), while 12% are Alawis (Arabs). About 10% are Christians (largely Arabs but also Armenians) and some 3% are Druze.³ Small numbers belong to other Muslim sects and there are a few Jews, and Yazidis (a Kurdish ethno-religious group).^{4,5}

² Europa World Yearbook: Syria

³ The Druze religion is considered a version of Islam by some but not others.

⁴ Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking ethnic group whose religion combines elements of Zoroastrianism and Sufi Islam

⁵ US State Department: [Background Note: Syria](#)



Source: Stratfor

The population is concentrated particularly in the west of the country with smaller centres along the Euphrates river and in the Kurdish north east.

2.2 Syria's sectarian history

Alawites are part of a very distinct quasi-Muslim sect that mixes elements of Ancient Greek philosophy, Zoroastrianism, Shia Islam and Christianity. Alawites believe in the divinity of Ali, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. They are also said to take wine as a sacrament and celebrate Christmas and other Christian and Zoroastrian holy days. However, it is a highly secretive faith and believers are sworn not to reveal details of the religious practice to outsiders. The child of an Alawite and an outsider is not allowed to become an Alawite.

Almost a thousand years ago, the Alawites split from the mainstream of Shiism. For hundreds of years, the Alawites were persecuted by the authorities of various empires that ruled what is now Syria, some wishing to impose orthodox Sunnism on the Alawites. As a response to persecution, adopted the practice of *taqiyya*, or hiding one's beliefs from outsiders in order to protect oneself from persecution. This Alawite tradition of secrecy may have had a political effect on modern Syria, suggests one commentator:

Taqiyya makes a perfect qualification for membership in the mukhabarat — the ubiquitous intelligence/security apparatus that has dominated Syria's government for more than four decades.⁶

⁶ Malise Ruthven, "Storm Over Syria", *New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2011

Under Sunni Ottoman Turkish rule for centuries, the Alawites, or Nusayris, as they were known then, were oppressed and marginalised. Their position left them impoverished and they tended to remain in their mountain strongholds in the west of Syria.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Syria was administered by France. The Alawites were less hostile to the European interlopers than the Sunnis, and partly because of this (perhaps also as a divide-and-rule strategy), the French encouraged Alawites to join the armed forces. From 1922 to 1942, there was even an Alawite state including the mountains and the coast including Latakia and Tartus.

When the French government decided to amalgamate the Alawite entity with the rest of Syria, a group of Alawite notables decided in 1936 to write to Léon Blum, then President of France and the first Jew to take that office. They argued that to the Alawis could not be united with the rest of Syria, because they, along with other minorities would be persecuted by the Muslim majority (and they presented themselves as non-Muslims):

The spirit of hatred and fanaticism embedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the Mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, irrespective of the fact that such abolition will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief.⁷

The Alawite notables, one of whom was Hafez's father, grandfather of the current president, went on to make common cause with the Jews in Palestine, no doubt intending to play on Blum's pro-Jewish sympathies. However, the letter fell on deaf ears and, despite the protests, the separate entity was incorporated into the rest of Syria.

On independence in 1941, Alawites maintained their strong position in the armed forces, as the new state lurched from one coup d'état to another. In 1949 there were three in one year, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s the country was plagued by political instability. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, the current president's late father, overthrew the government – the seventh time since independence that this had happened.

Al-Assad's coup finally established Alawite control of Syria. Alawite ascendancy in the armed forces was reinforced by Hafez, particularly in certain elite regiments that were to be relied on to protect the regime in the event of trouble. At the same time, Syria was proclaimed a secular state.

The Syrian uprising is not entirely a Sunni majority population rebelling against an Alawite regime. Many protesters were from the minority communities, particularly at the beginning of the protests before it became violent. However, as violence has increased, the conflict has taken on an increasingly sectarian character, partly encouraged by the government, which plays on fears of sectarian bloodletting if the regime were to fall. As ever in the Arab world, family and tribal ties, often across borders, are very important.

Treatment of minorities

One of the Assad regime's main claims to legitimacy is that it treats all Syrians alike, reduces sectarian tensions and holds the country together. With examples such as Iraq and Lebanon showing how serious sectarian and inter-ethnic strife can be in the region, the claim should not be dismissed out of hand.

⁷ Quoted in "[Syria's Ruling Alawite Sect](#)", *New York Times*, 14 June 2012

In the years before the uprising began, it appears that the regime did indeed have a relatively good record in protecting freedom of worship, compared with some neighbouring countries in the region. The constitution protects freedom of religion and some legislation and official policies enact this freedom. On the other hand, there is a constitutional requirement for the president to be a Muslim, and sharia law is protected as the principal source of Syrian law. Proselytising is also restricted by law and public order legislation has been used against religious practice.

Membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, the conservative Sunni organisation originated in Egypt, is outlawed, as is adherence to Salafist groups (fundamentalist Sunni). Jehovah's Witnesses are also banned and various religious groups are closely monitored by the state. While the authorities made some effort to protect freedom of worship, there were reportedly frictions between ordinary Syrians of different religions in 2010.⁸

The record of protecting freedom of worship and keeping minorities relatively safe from inter-communal violence has had its effect. According to two specialists quoted in February, the regime has a solid support base of at least 30%.⁹ The bulk of this support comes from Alawis and Christians, and includes some Druze, despite the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's support for the uprising.

Kurds and Islamists

The government has a much worse record when it comes to groups that it has traditionally feared as a potential political challenge to the regime. Essentially, that means two: Kurds and Islamists.

The principal ethnic minority in the country, the Kurds, has consistently experienced discrimination based on ethnic origin. The government fears the growth of separatism in the Kurdish region of the north east of the country and links some Kurdish activists to the Kurdish Workers' Party, the PKK, which is banned as a terrorist organisation by the EU and others.

In 2010, dozens of political activists were sentenced to jail terms.¹⁰ There have been restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and on the expression of Kurdish culture, including giving babies Kurdish names. In addition, some 300,000 Syrian-born Kurds are effectively stateless.¹¹

The fate of Islamists is perhaps even worse: it was to put down violent opposition by the Muslim Brotherhood that Assad senior killed tens of thousands of residents of the central town of Hamah in February 1982. It is a capital offence to belong to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and many Islamist activists are arbitrarily imprisoned. According to Amnesty International, torture was regularly used by the authorities, even before the beginning of the uprising:

Suspected Islamists and suspected members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood faced arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and unfair trials, usually before the SSSC [Supreme State Security Court], which rarely imposes prison sentences of less than five years. Those convicted of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood were sentenced to death but their sentences were immediately commuted

⁸ [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#), US Department of State, 13 September 2011

⁹ "As Syria votes on constitution, Assad retains solid backing", *Washington Post*, 26 February 2012

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2011: Syria](#)

¹¹ Amnesty International, *Annual report 2011, Syria*

to 12-year prison terms. Hundreds of convicted Islamist prisoners were held at Saydnaya Military Prison, where conditions were harsh.¹²

2.3 The minorities and the rebellion

Christians and Kurds have a very different position in relation to the regime. The Christians have been co-opted to a certain extent: they are well-represented in the business elite and in the upper echelons of government and the regime is accused of using the fear of repression by the Sunni majority to gain Christian support for regime survival. On the other hand, Kurdish identity has been vigorously repressed (see above), since the government (along with others in the region) fears Kurdish nationalism.

Kurdish representatives have had a stormy relationship with other members of the Syrian National Council, leaving meetings after arguments over their demands for Kurdish autonomy within a future state.¹³ It may well be that the general Kurdish population has low expectations of what is likely to be gained in an eventual transition to majority rule.

There have, however, been significant Kurdish demonstrations against the regime, particularly in al-Qamishli, the main Kurdish town. Demonstrators have died in crackdowns by the security forces, but as yet there has been no full scale assault on any Kurdish city. As the rebellion has progressed, Kurds have become one of the best-organised groups in the opposition, partly because of their history of political organisation. By summer 2012, they were reported to have taken control of significant areas of northern Syria, as regime forces were suspected of making a strategic retreat to concentrate on retaking the Syrian heartlands in the west.

Christians have taken a back seat in the rebellion. A Christian priest from Aleppo said early on that this was what the Church wanted:

The main struggle is between the Sunnis and Alawites. I know there are some Christians who are demonstrating against the regime and others in the army and working with the security bodies. However, we do not want to be seen taking sides, we want to keep our community neutral.¹⁴

There are some significant posts in the regime filled by Christians and many may still hope for the survival of the regime, fearing worse if it falls.

The Druze, representing about three percent of the population, have stayed out of the conflict. As one of the smallest communities, the Druze are understandably fearful of the consequences of an outbreak of inter-communal violence. Druze religious leaders have specifically called on their followers to remain neutral.

2.4 Assad's armoury

Militarily, Syria is a low to middle-ranking power in the region and uses its army, which comprises the majority of its personnel and assets, largely for maintaining internal security and territorial defence. The country had a defence budget of some \$2 billion in 2011, considerably less than Qatar's, for example, but twice that of Lebanon.¹⁵ Before the 2011 uprising began, Syria had active armed forces strength of 295,000 (of which 220,000 were in the army) and 314 reservists, but the strength of the armed forces is no longer clear since an unknown number of soldiers have defected to the Free Syrian Army. What is evident,

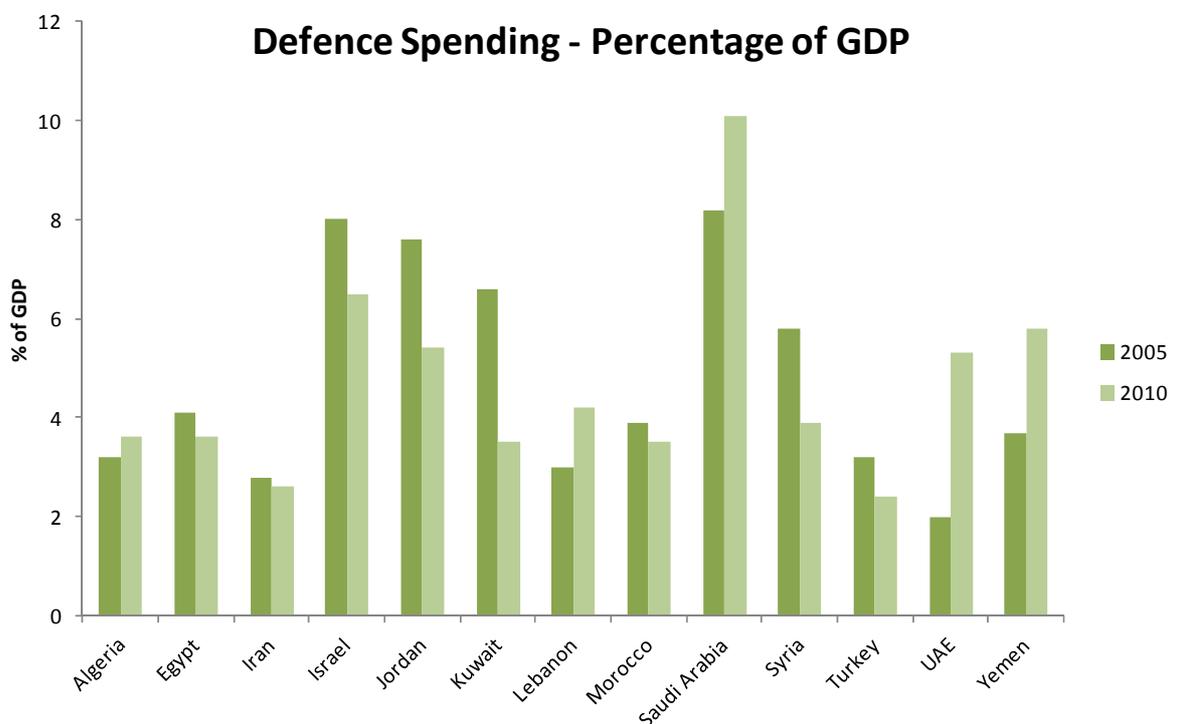
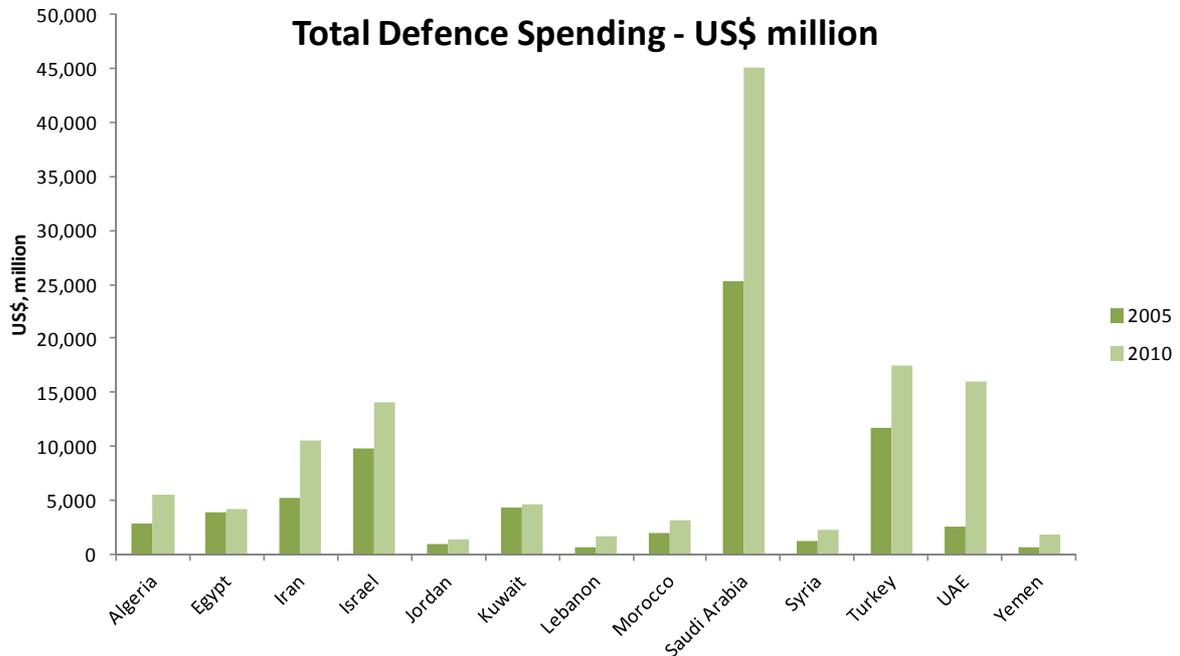
¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Kurdish opposition quits Syrian National Council", *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 6 April 2012

¹⁴ "Factional fight - Conflicting objectives in the Syrian struggle", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 12 April 2012

¹⁵ *The Military Balance 2012*, International Institute for Strategic Studies

however, from Syria's defence expenditure is that it is not the threat posed to neighbours by the Syrian military that is the worry: Syria spends far less than Turkey, for example. The threat is to Syrian civilians, but also of the sectarian strife spreading to neighbouring countries.



Source: IISS Military Balance

Army

One of the most important features of Syria's armed forces is the elite, non-conscripted and Alawite-dominated forces on which the regime depends for its survival. The Syrian

Republican Guard, the Fourth Armoured Division and the Mukhabarat or secret police leadership and rank and file are dominated by Alawites. The Republican Guard, led at the time by Hafez's younger brother Rifaat, along with the predecessor of the Fourth Armoured Division, carried out Hafez al-Assad's Hama massacre to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in that town in 1982, an assault which led to the death of some 20,000 Sunnis.

The Republican Guard, composed of six brigades, is now led by Maher al-Assad, Bashar's younger brother. It is the only force allowed to deploy in the capital, Damascus, and its role is to defend the country's leadership against domestic unrest.

Maher al-Assad also heads the Fourth Armoured Division, although there are reports that he lost both legs in the bomb attack that killed four members of the security cabinet in July.¹⁶

Most of the regular Syrian army is composed largely of Sunni conscripts, and the loyalty of these is in some doubt. The Sunni divisions are not allowed near Damascus and are closely monitored by the *Mukhabarat* secret police for any signs of mutiny.¹⁷

Air force

The Syrian air force is relatively effective, with Russian-supplied MiGs and Sukhois, some quite modern. It has 30,000 personnel plus 10,000 reservists. In December 2011 Syria ordered a consignment of Yak-130s from Russia in December. These planes are nominally for training but might have been used to attack rebel forces in Syria. Russia announced in July that it would not deliver the planes (or any other weaponry).¹⁸

Until recently there were few reports that the Syrian government had used its warplanes against the rebels. Lately, however, there have been allegations of air force strikes. One reason for the reluctance may be that most air force pilots are reported to be Sunnis and the government may fear repeats of the defection in June of a MiG-21 pilot who defected to Jordan with his plane and was granted asylum.

Air defences

An important obstacle to any idea of armed outside intervention in the Syria conflict has been the strength of Syrian air defence systems. The Israeli bombing of a suspect nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007 encouraged Syria to improve its air defences, and the government of Bashar al-Assad bought a range of new systems from the Russian government. (This may have allowed Syria to transfer some of its older air defence equipment to Hezbollah.)

Intelligence agencies

There are four main intelligence agencies in Syria (the *Mukhabarat*):

- The Department of Military Intelligence
- The Political Security Directorate
- The General Intelligence Directorate
- The Air Force Intelligence Directorate

¹⁶ "Report: Assad's brother 'fighting for his life,' month after Damascus bomb attack", *Haaretz*, 14 August 2012

¹⁷ Bruce Riedel, "The Battle Within Syria: Who Will Win?", *The Daily Beast*, 12 June 2012

¹⁸ "Russia stops sale of new weapons to Syria", *UPI*, 9 July 2012

The intelligence agencies have branches in the main cities and have been implicated in the killing of protesters and in arbitrary arrests and torture.¹⁹

In summer 2012, the tempo of the Syrian conflict suddenly appeared to quicken. After long months during which many predicted a stalemate between the two sides, a bomb killed some of the Syrian government's top security personnel, the authorities appeared to be losing control of much larger areas of the country, and more senior figures defected, including the Prime Minister.

Syria's background in ethnic and sectarian divisions and its history of extreme instability have created the conditions for the present bloodshed. Syria's opposition, too, is divided and unstable; this has been one of the obstacles to the outside world providing assistance to the opposition.

Chemical and biological weapons

The Syrian weapons of mass destruction strategy was initiated by Hafez al-Assad, when he gained control of the country in 1970.

The programme is widely thought to have been developed with Soviet assistance during the 1980s.²⁰ As far back as 1983, the CIA stated in a (then) classified report that, along with Iraq, Syria had been set up with a CW capability by the Soviet Union:

Syria, also a major recipient of Soviet CW assistance, probably has the most advanced CW capability in the Middle East, with the possible exception of Egypt. Both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union provided the chemical agents, delivery systems and training that flowed to Syria.²¹

In an unclassified report, the CIA reported to Congress in 1997 that Syria had a stockpile of Sarin and was working on other agents, as well as missiles capable of delivering them.²²

The US openly accused Syria of having weapons of mass destruction in April 2003, just after the invasion of Iraq. US officials feared that Syria was transferring weapons to Iraq. Sanctions were imposed on Syria in 2004 by the US *Syria Accountability Act*, partly in response to the alleged chemical weapons programme. The *Syria Accountability Act* stated that:

...the Government of Syria should halt the development and deployment of medium- and long-range surface-to-surface missiles and cease the development and production of biological and chemical weapons.²³

In 2007, the US Treasury designated three Syrian bodies as weapons proliferators under an executive order. The three state institutions are divisions of Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Centre, which had already been designated by President Bush a "weapons proliferator" in June 2005 for research on biological and chemical weapons development.²⁴

¹⁹ *By all means necessary, Individual and command responsibility for crimes against humanity in Syria*, Human Rights Watch, December 2011

²⁰ James Blitz, "Concern grows over the fate of regime's chemical arms", *Financial Times*, 16 July 2012

²¹ *Implications of Soviet use of chemical and toxin weapons for US security interests*, CIA, 1983, p11

²² *Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions, 1 July Through 30 December 1999*, CIA, 2000

²³ *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003*, US Congress, Section 3 (5)

²⁴ *Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response*, Congressional Research Service, 12 July 2012

Damascus ratified the Geneva Protocol in 1968,²⁵ but is not a party to the *Chemical Weapons Convention*.

Reports emerged in July of Syria moving its chemical weapons to locations near the country's borders.²⁶ It was not clear whether the purpose of the move was to prepare for their use or to prevent them from falling onto the wrong hands. Israel said that it was prepared to take military action to stop Hizbollah from getting the weapons. There are also reasonable fears that the weapons may fall into the hands of extreme elements in the Syrian opposition movement, including violent *jihadis* who could possibly use them against Western targets. Some analysts have argued, however, that the risk of terrorist use of chemical weapons should not be exaggerated.²⁷ There are many practical difficulties in their use. Various groups are known to have investigated using them in the past but there have been few instances where chemicals have been used effectively by terrorist organisations, apart from the Tokyo underground attack in 1995.

In a statement on 23 July, a Syrian government spokesman said that the weapons would never be used against internal opponents:

No chemical or biological weapons will ever be used, and I repeat, will never be used, during the crisis in Syria no matter what the developments inside Syria. All of these types of weapons are in storage and under security and the direct supervision of the Syrian armed forces and will never be used unless Syria is exposed to external aggression.²⁸

The statement was the first open admission that Syria possesses weapons of mass destruction, and the last comment about external aggression was taken by many as a threat that they would be used if necessary.

Biological weapons

There have been widespread reports that Syria maintains a biological weapons capability. It is thought likely that Syria has stores of anthrax bacillus, botulinum toxin and the toxin ricin, but that its domestic production capabilities are limited and its weaponisation of biological weapons (the development of delivery systems) is not advanced.²⁹ Syria signed the *Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention* on 14 April 1972, but has not yet ratified it.

3 The crisis

3.1 The array of political and militant forces in Syria

The opposition

The opposition has been plagued by divisions and the lack of either a clear strategy on how to bring about change in Syria or a clear picture of what that change should be. Yezid Sayigh argues that those oppositionists inside Syria are divided from those in exile and disagree on whether to arm the opposition, invite outside military intervention or negotiate with the regime. There is also a deep class divide: this fracture affects attitudes to Islamism and militarisation and sectarianism.³⁰

²⁵ This protocol to the Geneva Conventions prohibits the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous, or other gases, and bans bacteriological warfare. It was opened for signature on 17 June 1925

²⁶ "[Syria moves chemical weapons before wider offensive: defector](#)", *Reuters*, 21 July 2012

²⁷ "The Specter of Syrian Chemical Weapons", *Stratfor*, 2 August 2012

²⁸ "Syria threatens to use chemical weapons in case of a foreign attack", *Washington Post*, 23 July 2012

²⁹ Nuclear Threat Initiative, Country profile, [Syria](#) [23 July 2012]

³⁰ Yezid Sayigh, "[The Coming Tests of the Syrian Opposition](#)", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 April 2012

Syrian National Council

The SNC is a coalition of opposition groups formed in Istanbul in August 2011. It is recognised as a legitimate interlocutor representing the Syrian people by the UK and a number of other European governments. Libya recognises it as the legitimate government in exile. The SNC supports both direct international intervention and the arming of the Free Syrian Army,³¹ and the groups in the council include the following:

- The Muslim Brotherhood is strongly represented on the SNC. Since the Brotherhood is outlawed in Syria and membership attracts the death penalty in Syrian law, the leading figures associated with the Brotherhood are in exile. The Brotherhood is Sunni Islamist. It had been reluctant to call for outside intervention or to arm the opposition Free Syrian Army but, since the March 2012 massacre in Homs and the failure of the Kofi Annan initiative to secure a convincing ceasefire deal with the government, it now supports these moves.

Like its Egyptian counterpart, the Syrian Brotherhood supports the free market and its support is strong among the middle class.

At first the Brotherhood was not involved in the Free Syrian Army's struggle within Syria, but that changed in summer 2012 and the Brotherhood distributes funds to fighters within Syria, particularly around its traditional stronghold, Hama.³² The Brotherhood also maintains relief networks within Syria, through which it channels financial aid from abroad (much of it from Saudi Arabia), giving it important political leverage.

- The Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change grouping - a movement born during the so-called "Damascus Spring" of 2000/2001 that called for broad democratic reform, and was suppressed by the Assad regime. The group is largely secular and left-leaning, and this has led to clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood.
- Local Coordination Committees - Grass-roots movements that have led demonstrations across the country.
- Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution – a group inside Syria. It is not formally a member of the SNC but has sent representatives. It stresses the importance of a political solution, while accepting the need for armed struggle.³³
- Kurdish factions, tribal leaders and independent figures make up the rest of the council. The Kurdish factions have repeatedly clashed with the Arab groups over the Kurds' demands for an autonomous region.³⁴

The assistant to the leader of the council caused controversy recently when it was revealed that she had said in a hacked email that Israel was a necessity in the region. This drew complaints from the Muslim Brotherhood. In June 2012, the long time leader of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, was replaced by Kurdish activist Abdelbasset Sayda. The organisation continues to be accused of infighting and a failure to draw in other opposition forces.

³¹ [Syria: Prospects for Intervention](#), Chatham House Meeting Summary, August 2012

³² "Brotherhood seeks to fill post-Assad vacuum", *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 10 August 2012

³³ Elizabeth O'Bagy, "[Disorganized Like a Fox, Why it's a great thing that the Syrian opposition is fragmented](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 29 June 2012

³⁴ Based on "[Q&A: Syrian opposition alliance](#)", *BBC News Online*, 16 November 2011

Syrian Revolution General Commission

The Syrian Revolution General Commission is an umbrella group of more than 40 opposition groups that aim to overthrow the Assad regime. Its formation was announced in August 2011 in Turkey and it organises protests. It remains divided from the main Syrian National Council.

National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change

This group is the main alternative to the SNC. It is based in Syria and opposes foreign intervention or the militarisation of the conflict. It has criticised the Syrian National Council for its support for intervention and for its attempts to mobilise the public. The committee blames the government for the crisis and calls for a peaceful solution, but it has supported negotiations with the regime.

Officials from the National Coordination Committee (NCC) have visited Moscow a number of times, wanting to keep channels open with the Russians.

Salafists

Extreme conservative Islamist forces are gaining ground in Syria. As in Egypt, they may challenge the more organised Muslim Brotherhood for influence in any post-transition system, and their influence is based largely on their strength among the poor. While the more middle class Muslim Brotherhood has organisational strengths, even in post 1981 Syria, the liberalisation of the Syrian economy in the last decade has created a growing class of poor Syrians with no foothold in the formal economy, often migrating to large slum areas on the outskirts of the major towns. These people have provided many of the foot soldiers of the uprising and are largely the source of support for the Salafists.³⁵

The exact configuration of the various groups shifts from time to time. In June it was announced that a new joint action committee had been formed between the Syrian Expatriates Organization, the General Commission for the Syrian Revolution and the Supreme Council for the Syrian Revolution.³⁶

Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army was formed on 29 July 2011 and is led by Riad al-Asaad, a former air force colonel. It is composed mainly of deserters from the regular army and is based mainly inside Syria, although the group's commander is based in Turkey. It merged with another group of defectors from the Syrian armed forces, the Free Officers' Battalion, on 23 September 2011. It is not clear how many fighters the FSA has, but they have until recently been lightly armed, mostly with Russian AK47s, and with no heavy artillery. Weapons are reported to be entering Syria from Iraq, often through the Kurdish Region of Iraq and also to have been bought from corrupt soldiers in the Syrian army. Ammunition is said to be in short supply.³⁷

Western countries have been helping the FSA with communications equipment, including walkie-talkies and it may be receiving funding and weaponry from Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. While it is difficult to verify anything about the FSA, its ability to extend its control over significant territory is testament to growing effectiveness.

Violent jihadis

The Assad regime maintains that armed opposition to the authorities comes from terrorists and foreign countries conspiring against Syria. While Western governments have largely

³⁵ Yezid Sayigh, "The Coming Tests of the Syrian Opposition", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 April 2012

³⁶ "Syrian opposition groups unite to 'expedite the toppling' of al-Assad", CNN, 19 June 2012

³⁷ "Bullets and home-made bombs; Syria's rebel fighters", *Economist*, 28 April 2012

dismissed these claims as exaggerated, some analysts have been increasingly concerned about the influence of jihadist groups. Director of US Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2012 that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had probably already moved into Syria and may have carried out bombings in Aleppo and Damascus, attacks which carried the hallmarks of al-Qaeda operations. He said: "We believe that al-Qaeda in Iraq is extending its reach into Syria."³⁸

There is reported to be growing evidence that this is the case, and that AQI may be merging the Iraqi and Syrian struggles into one theatre of operations. Known jihadist groups from Iraq and another from Lebanon are reported to be active as well as Peshmerga fighters from the Kurdish region of Iraq.³⁹ It is also reported that Libyan fighters have moved into Syria.

The biggest Sunni jihadist group is an organisation called the **Jabhat al-Nusra**, which is thought to be connected to fighting in Iraq,⁴⁰ although it has not pledged formal allegiance to al-Qaeda. The group is thought to have a fighting force of several hundred, led by someone using the name Al-Fateh abu Muhammad al-Golani and it has claimed responsibility for several bomb attacks, including one in Damascus in January 2012 that killed 26 and another in Aleppo on 10 February in which at least 25 were killed. More recently, the group claimed authorship of a suicide vehicle bomb attack on an air force intelligence hospital in Deir al-Zour on 19 May, which killed nine people. In video messages, the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra has threatened to expel Christian and Alawite minorities from Syria.⁴¹

Does the Syrian opposition support democracy and human rights?

The short answer is that no-one knows.

The Syrian National Council makes a solid commitment to widely-accepted standards of democracy and human rights. Here is an extract from its National Covenant for a New Syria:

The freely elected parliament will reflect the will and interests of the people in order to ensure full legitimacy to the government emerging from it.

The president will be freely elected by the people or the Parliament. There will be no one man or one body rule in Syria. The powers of the president will be clearly articulated in the constitution, consistent with the separation of powers.

The elected government will ensure the full and unambiguous independence of the judiciary and its institutions.

The constitution will guarantee the rights of individuals and groups enshrined in all universally recognized fundamental human rights and international conventions. It will protect the public and private freedoms of all citizens including the freedom of expression, opinion, conscience and beliefs according to the international conventions.

The state will guarantee the rights and freedoms of women, and will maintain all their achievements, while securing their civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights and their participation on equal terms with men in all fields.⁴²

Despite the stated policies of the SNC, there have been persistent claims that the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to push it in a more Islamist direction.

³⁸ "The downside of arming Syrian rebels", *Reuters*, 23 February 2012

³⁹ "AQI involvement breeds fear that conflicts could merge", *Gulf States Newsletter*, 26 April 2012

⁴⁰ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Jabhat al-Nusra [7 August 2012]

⁴¹ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Jabhat al-Nusra [accessed 7 August 2012]

⁴² [National Covenant for a New Syria](#), Syrian National Council, 27 March 2012

Back in November 2011, the International Crisis Group wrote a report in which they wondered whether the Free Syrian Army would accept political leadership from the Syrian National Council:

Does it serve as an umbrella for essentially self-directed armed groups that could morph into disorderly militias? Or is it integrating defectors into a hierarchical, disciplined structure? In the latter case, will its leadership agree to political oversight, for instance by the National Council, or will it endeavour to steer its own course and act autonomously in the aftermath of the regime's fall? Will it stand for national unity or fall prey to sectarian polarisation? Can it refrain from mimicking the murderous behaviour of the regime against which it is fighting but from which it springs? The Free Army's posting of forced confessions by captured security officers – who, in at least one instance, showed obvious signs of torture – stands as a first, cautionary tale.⁴³

Since that report came out, the influence of the National Council and other political groups, especially outside Syria, has declined, as accusations of endless infighting and Islamist drift continue to fly. As the conflict has turned into a civil war and the possibility of a negotiated solution has all but vanished, it is the armed forces of the opposition that have taken control of the rebellion. The Free Syrian Army is more a collection of militias, however, than a unified military force. To ask what policies it espouses rather misses the point..

Western governments signalled their disillusionment with the capacity of the SNC to unify the opposition and shape the future Syria this month. William Hague announced on 10 August that the UK would be allocating an extra £5 million to opposition groups, this time only those inside Syria, excluding the SNC. The worry, reportedly, among western capitals was that Gulf funding was being channelled to Salafist (Islamic fundamentalist) armed groups in Syria and that these anti-democratic and anti-human rights groups were becoming disproportionately influential as a result (the Saudi government claims that it is controlling tightly the money that goes to Syria, to avoid sponsoring terrorism).⁴⁴

So what do rebel activists in Syria want? According to a poll conducted in December 2011, 82% of activists and people more distantly associated with the rebellion favoured Turkey as a political and economic model, while only 5% had a favourable view of Saudi politics. Activists also had a strongly favourable view of the US, with Western Europe coming close behind. Less than 2% had a favourable view of Iran.⁴⁵

Many observers fear that the rebels may become increasingly radicalised and increasingly sectarian as the conflict continues. The views expressed in the December poll may already be out of date.

Groups supporting the government

Alawites

At the beginning of the unrest it was reported that many demonstrators were young and educated Alawites. As the conflict has become radicalised, most reports are of Sunni fighters; most of the hardliners in top government and military jobs are Alawites, while many high-profile defectors from the regime have been Sunnis.

The Shabbiha

The Shabbiha are the Alawite militia, close to the regime, who are thought to have been at the forefront of some of the worst atrocities committed, for example the Houla massacre in

⁴³ *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, International Crisis Group, 24 November 2011

⁴⁴ Jane's online seminar, 21 August 2012

⁴⁵ David Pollock, "What Does the Syrian Opposition Believe?", Washington Institute

May 2012. The Shabbiha have their roots in smuggling and other illegal economic operations and have been described as a 'mafia'.⁴⁶ Emerging in the 1970s, they grew in importance with the expansion of the private sector. Some have said that the business elite associated with the Assads, who benefitted from the privatisation programme, are little more than the respectable face of the Shabbiha.⁴⁷

While the more moderate elements among the regime's support have been marginalised or have defected (especially Sunni politicians), many observers fear that the hard Alawite core will fight to the last. The diehards would be composed of Alawites in the official security forces and the Shabbiha.

The business elite

The attitude of the business elite is crucial in Syria. Businessmen from all communities, mainly based in Damascus and Aleppo, have benefitted from the government's policies under Bashar, who privatised state monopolies and gave elites the opportunity to make sizeable profits. The government's reforms, meanwhile, have probably been one of the root causes of the unrest as nepotistic capitalism and corruption have often been the replacement for the Soviet-style command economy, and subsidies have been reduced or scrapped.

In the first year or so of the uprising, the business class appeared to be relatively supportive of the government. The fact that Damascus and, particularly, the commercial capital of Aleppo were largely peaceful for many months allowed business to continue. However, the economy was always fragile (see *Impact of sanctions*, below). In summer 2012, fighting escalated to the extent that Damascus and Aleppo were clearly threatened. The heart of the country's economy was finally in danger, calling into question the loyalty of business elites to the regime. Many were reported to have left Syria.

3.2 Political reform

The Assad regime early on promised to reform the country's political system in response to the unrest. A state of emergency, in place since the Ba'ath party came to power, allowed the government to ban peaceful demonstrations, to arrest those suspected of being a security risk, to try political suspects in the State Security Court and a host of other actions. The state of emergency was lifted in April 2011 but its lifting appeared to have done little to change the situation in Syria. Political prisoners were released on a few occasions, but more oppositionists almost simultaneously being imprisoned.

In a constitutional referendum in February 2012, 89% voted in favour, from a turnout of 57.4%, according to government figures.

The Syrian constitution was amended to:

- Allow multi-party elections to the parliament. The Ba'ath Party had been described as the "leading party in society and the state" in article 8 of the old constitution. The new article 8 reads: "The political system is based on the principle of political pluralism, and rule is only obtained and exercised democratically through voting".⁴⁸
- Set a limit of two seven-year presidential terms. The new article 88 reads: "The President of the Republic is elected for 7 years as of the end of the term of the existing President. The President can be elected for only one more successive term." The limit would not be applied retrospectively, so Bashar al-Assad would be allowed

⁴⁶ "Syria unrest: Who are the shabiha?", *BBC News Online*, 29 May 2012

⁴⁷ "A sect with its back to the wall", *World Today*, August and September 2012

⁴⁸ "Draft Constitution for the Syrian Arab Republic", *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 18 February 2012

to continue in office. The President could also 'do a Putin' and come back for a third term after a break.

Despite the reforms in the constitution, the president retains the power to form and dismiss governments, so reforms are unlikely to change the marginal position the legislature has had under the Assad regime. Although the constitutional changes might in the long term loosen the grip of the Ba'ath Party on power and open up Syrian political system, they were clearly not satisfactory to the protesters in Syria, who continued to take to the streets.

On 7 May 2011, in the midst of ongoing violence in many parts of the country, a parliamentary election was held. The election was boycotted by the opposition. The government said that it was "historic," showing Syria was "moving forward with the announced comprehensive reform program despite all conspiracies to hinder the development process."⁴⁹

An activist in Hama was quoted to have a different view:

Of course they are not serious. They are just trying to lift international pressure and show the world that they are making reforms, while we are being shelled and killed. It's like a dance on the corpses of dead people.⁵⁰

3.3 Information blackout

Journalists

Foreign journalists have been extremely limited in what they can do in Syria. They have not normally been granted permission by the Syrian Information Ministry to enter the country or to report from areas where conflict is taking place. On 9 March the Information Ministry threatened to take action against Arab and foreign journalists who had entered the country without permission. The Information Minister accused such journalists of issuing false reports and of collaborating with and justifying the work of terrorists.⁵¹ Journalists have also gone missing.

There have even been suggestions that the Syrian armed forces have intentionally targeted buildings sheltering foreign journalists. After the death of *Sunday Times* journalist Marie Colvin, a US citizen, and French photographer Remi Ochlik, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that they had been "assassinated". There were also reports of house being used as a press centre in the Homs suburb of Bab Amr being targeted by snipers.⁵²

The Western media have largely relied on mobile phone video recordings made by local activists for television images. These are obviously difficult to verify, but that has not stopped the authorities from attempting to stop them getting out. A number of 'citizen journalists' have been killed.

Humanitarian missions

The Syrian government has also been reluctant to allow international aid and humanitarian agencies to visit the country, perhaps because to limit the amount of information flowing out of the country. UN humanitarian representative Baroness Amos had repeatedly been refused access to Syria. Aid agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the

⁴⁹ "Syrians Vote in Election Dismissed by Foes as a Farce", *NeNw York Times*, 8 May 2012

⁵⁰ "Syrians vote in elections boycotted by opposition" *Washington Post*,

⁵¹ "Syria: Foreign media threatened, journalists missing", Index on Censorship press release, 14 March 2012

⁵² "Were Marie Colvin and journalists deliberately targeted by Syria's army?", *Guardian*, 23 February 2012

Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society have had 'huge difficulty' getting to the conflict areas of Syria in order to get aid on and to get wounded people out.⁵³

On 10 March, Baroness Amos was finally permitted to visit Syria. She visited Homs and the Baba Amr suburb, where she said that the destruction was horrifying:

In Baba Amr I was horrified by the destruction I saw. No building was untouched and there was clear evidence of use of heavy artillery and tanks. Baba Amr was almost deserted. A few people in tears, as they tried to salvage a few possessions. I am extremely concerned as to the whereabouts of the people who have been displaced from Baba Amr by the shelling and other violence.⁵⁴

The number of refugees in neighbouring countries and internally displaced persons in Syria continued to grow. In August 2010 Baroness Amos completed another visit to Syria. She said a million had been displaced and two and a half million people faced destitution in Syria, and she called for the government to show more flexibility in allowing the UN to work with NGOs such as the Syrian Red Crescent to get more aid to the people.⁵⁵

3.4 Escalating violence; defections from the government

The level of violence in Syria has increased inexorably. In March 2012, there were reports that civilians including children had been slaughtered in the Baba Amr district of Homs, as rebel fighters withdrew from the city. Opposition activists said that pro-government gangs, the Shabbiha, rounded up men and boys over the age of 14, tortured them and then killed them. In April, a video which appeared to show a man being buried alive as punishment for sending videos to television channels hostile to the Syrian government.

While the level of violence on the part of regime forces has increased, there have been increasingly frequent bomb attacks targeted at state security installations. In February and again in March, Aleppo and Damascus saw bomb attacks, directed at government institutions. On 30 April, two suicide bombs aimed at the Air Force Intelligence headquarters and the Military Intelligence headquarters exploded, killing several people, mainly security personnel. The opposition claimed that the government had staged the attack to support its own narrative of a terrorist opposition. The government said that the attacks were carried out by armed terrorist gangs. Bomb-making is relatively cheap and easy, however, and for an opposition starved of heavier weapons, their use might be a logical step for the opposition.⁵⁶

With reliable information about Syria difficult to come by, it is impossible to say for certain who is responsible for the bombings. However, al-Qaeda operatives are thought to have entered Syria from Iraq.

Human Rights Watch reports that fighting around Idlib in late March and April amounted to armed conflict according to international humanitarian law and that forces associated with the regime may have been responsible for war crimes. The rights group says that government forces attacked towns near the city of Idlib and arbitrarily detained civilians, executing many of them, including children. A survivor is quoted in the report:

My daughters and I went out with buckets, and then my daughters, who were in front, ran to me, saying that my sons were there as well. After we extinguished the fire, we

⁵³ "Ground attack launched in Homs", *Financial Times*, 1 March 2012

⁵⁴ "Statement to the press on Syria", Under-secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos, UNOCHA, 12 March 2012

⁵⁵ "More aid must reach 2.5 million Syrians in dire need, says UN humanitarian chief", UN press release, 16 August 2012

⁵⁶ "Bullets and home-made bombs; Syria's rebel fighters", *Economist*, 28 April 2012

found their bodies. Bilal was shot in the middle of his forehead, Yousef behind his ear, and Talal was shot by two bullets, in the head and in the back. Their hands looked like they had been tied behind; the ropes burned, but the hands were still folded behind. We had to leave them in the street for about 10 hours; the shooting continued and we couldn't take the bodies away. We were only able to bury them after the army left.⁵⁷

The United Nations said in the spring that more than 10,000 had been killed since the beginning of the crisis and, despite some lulls associated with the ceasefire, the overall level of violence continued to increase. On 19 April, Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General, said that the Syrian government was "failing to keep the truce".⁵⁸

On 25 May, a massacre took place in the village of Taldou in Homs province, causing the death of 108 people, many of them women and children. The government blamed terrorists and armed gangs, while the opposition said that troops and pro-government militia, the Shabbiha, were responsible.

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated on 9 July that the total death toll was 17,000.⁵⁹

On 11 July in an important setback for the government the former ambassador to Iraq, Nawaf al-Fares, resigned. In interviews with Western media outlets, he claimed that the April bombing of the military intelligence headquarters was carried out on the instructions of the Syrian government:

I know for certain that not a single serving intelligence official was harmed during that explosion, as the whole office had been evacuated 15 minutes beforehand. All the victims were passers by instead. All these major explosions have been have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces.⁶⁰

On 12 July, a massacre was reported at Tremseh in the Hama region. Activists said that army and pro-Assad militiamen killed around 220 people. UN observers say the attack appeared to target army defectors and activists, although a massacre of civilians was not confirmed. But the UN did confirm that heavy weapons had been used by the government.

In the early stages of the conflict, the Syrian government avoided using air power to attack rebel positions, perhaps trying to reduce the likelihood of the imposition of a no-fly zone. In July, however, there were reports that the government had abandoned this policy and was increasingly using the air force although, as ever, these were difficult to verify. The rebels claimed that both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters were being used in Aleppo and elsewhere. There was evidence that the government was dropping cluster bombs loaded with anti-personnel bomblets.⁶¹

On 2 July 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, called for the Security Council to refer the Syrian situation to the International Criminal Court. This is not likely to happen, with Russian support for the Syrian government on the Security Council.

In the biggest blow to the Assad government so far, Defence Minister General Rajha and his deputy, Assef Shawkat (the brother-in-law of Bashar al-Assad), and Assistant to the vice-

⁵⁷ "They Burned My Heart", *War Crimes in Northern Idlib during Peace Plan Negotiations*, Human Rights Watch, May 2012

⁵⁸ "Syria 'failing to keep to truce', says Ban Ki-moon", *BBC News Online*, 19 April 2012

⁵⁹ "Syria's death toll crosses 17,000, victims mostly civilians: opposition group", *al-Arabiya*, 9 July 2012

⁶⁰ "Exclusive interview: why I defected from Bashar al-Assad's regime, by former diplomat Nawaf Fares", *Daily Telegraph*, 14 July 2012

⁶¹ "Syria steps up air campaign", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 July 2012

president and head of crisis management office General Hassan Turkomani were killed in a suicide bomb attack on 18 July. Head of the national security office, Hisham Ikhtyar, died later of his injuries. Both a violent *jihadi* group and the Free Syrian Army claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 6 August, the biggest (at least nominally) defection yet occurred when Prime Minister Riyad al-Hijab resigned and left Syria for Jordan. He is a Sunni Muslim who had been in office since June.

On 15 August, the UN panel investigating abuses perpetrated during the conflict issued a report saying that both the government and the opposition were responsible for war crimes. It stated that the Syrian state had pursued a policy of war crimes, including murder, extrajudicial killings and torture; gross violations of international human rights, including attacks against civilians and acts of sexual violence.⁶²

3.5 Regional ramifications

Turkey

The position of Turkey is crucial to the development of the Syria crisis. Syria and Turkey traditionally had difficult relations, allies as they were of the Soviet Union and the US, respectively. Turkey also enjoyed warm relations with Israel, while Syria backed hostile

Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Turkey's problems with the restive Kurdish minority in the south east were not eased by Syrian support for elements of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

Map courtesy of the Ministry of Defence

As Turkey lost faith in its prospects of EU membership, the government turned its attention to its eastern neighbours and instigated the 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. This particularly involved improving relations with Syria, with which Turkey shares a long border. To the dismay of some Western politicians, ties with Syria were rapidly strengthened and commerce flourished.

The uprising in Syria called that policy into question, however. While the Turkish government was ambivalent about the Arab uprisings at the beginning, the ferocity of the Assad regime's repression of the protests seems to have persuaded the Turkish government to abandon the Syrian regime in November 2011 and call for al-Assad's resignation.⁶³

Since then, Turkey has been one of the most vocal proponents of action against the Syrian government, suggesting that safe havens should be set up within Syrian territory on the Turkish border, a bold action that would violate Syrian sovereignty. Also in November 2011, Turkey imposed economic sanctions against Syria. Members of the Arab League also announced restrictions. In July 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan set out Turkey's uncompromising position in relation to Syria: "Assad and his bloodthirsty allies have understood well that their inevitable end has come. They know that their end will not be different from previous dictators".⁶⁴

Some analysts have interpreted the Turkish moves against the Assad regime as a wholesale reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy towards the West and, crucially, against Iran. On the other hand, practical considerations are crucial to the Turks too: they already have to deal

⁶² [Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic](#), UN Human Rights Council, 15 August 2012

⁶³ "Syria crisis: Erdogan steps up Turkey pressure on Assad", *BBC News Online*, 15 November 2011

⁶⁴ "Sons of Syria will respond to regimes attacks says Turkish PM", *Today's Zaman*, 31 July 2012

with more than 61,000 Syrian refugees,⁶⁵ and that number could be dwarfed by the exodus if the conflict deteriorates further.

The Turkish opposition, however, has criticised the government's policy for taking sides too much. Opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu said in July, "We do not want our people to pay the price for western interests. We do not want Turkey to be dragged into the swamp."⁶⁶

Kurds

Turkey's view of the Syrian conflict is uniquely Turkish and is particularly affected by relations with its Kurdish minority in the south east. Perhaps looking at the Iraqi example, where the Turkish air force conducted several raids in 2011 against the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a terrorist group. Many Turkish politicians fear the emergence of a 'Syrian Kurdistan' on its southern border, and the potential for Syrian disorder to allow the PKK to set up bases there.



Map courtesy of University of Texas

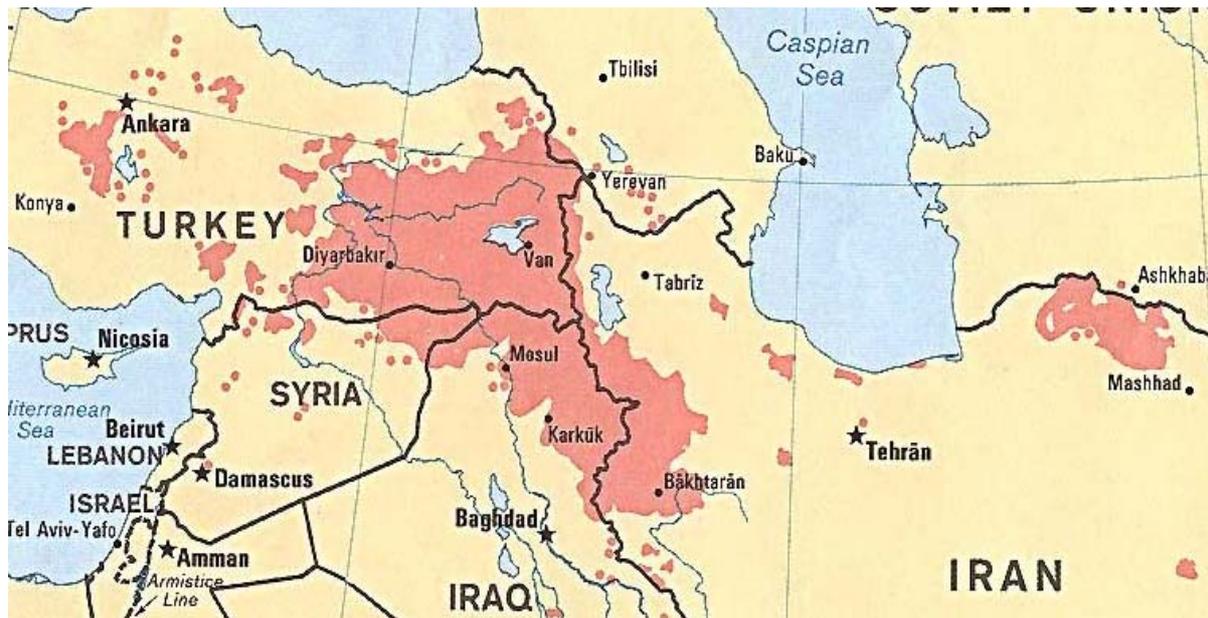
Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Iraqi Kurdistan in August 2012 to press the Kurdish Regional Government for cooperation in preventing Kurdish groups affiliated to the PKK from establishing themselves in Syria.⁶⁷ Turkey was particularly concerned about cooperation between Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Regional Government and the Syrian group the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which is alleged to be close to the PKK.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ UNHCR, [Syria Regional Refugee Response Information Sharing Portal](#) [15 August 2012]

⁶⁶ "Turkey is now in trouble over Syria says CHP leader", *Hurriyet*, 28 July 2012

⁶⁷ "Turkey to urge Barzani to step up cooperation against PKK in Syria", *Today's Zaman*, 31 July 2012

⁶⁸ "Barzani's Kurdish initiative in Syria takes Turkey by surprise", *Hurriyet*, 28 July 2012

Map of Kurdish-populated areas

Map courtesy of University of Texas

Kurdish forces have taken control of about half of the Kurdish area in Northern Syria, largely because Syrian government forces have retreated tactically from the area to concentrate on parts of the country that it sees as more important. This may be a foretaste of the breakup of Syria, although Turkey will not allow a Kurdish 'statelet' established on its border, as a regional expert from the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington DC argues:

...what will hold [the Kurds] back is Turkey's determination to prevent a mini-statelet in Syria along with the Kurds' own internal divisions. It is unlikely that Syria's Kurds will be able to establish a separate entity in Syria. Nor will the United States, nor the international community accept that.⁶⁹

Turkey has repeatedly reinforced the southern border with troops, armoured vehicles and missiles. This is mainly to deal with the perceived threat from Syrian government forces. However, Turkey may also wish to keep a military presence close to Kurdish areas.

Russia

Syria was long close to the Soviet Union, as exemplified by the 1980 Soviet/Syrian treaty of friendship and cooperation. Russia continued to supply Syria with the bulk of its arms after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union first agreed to install a naval base in Tartus, on the Syrian coast, in 1971. Tartus gave the Soviet navy its only foothold on the Mediterranean, and Russia remains committed to the base, which in 2009, it started to renovate. In January 2012, a flotilla of Russian naval vessels visited the port. Russia denied the visit had anything to do with the uprising, but the visit was welcomed by the Syrian government.

According to the *Economist*, Tartus is an important factor in Russian support for the Assad regime:

⁶⁹ "Will Syria's Kurds benefit from the crisis?" *BBC News Online*, 10 August 2012

The toppling of dictators in Iraq and Libya hurt Russia's oil interests and arms sales. It wants to avoid that in Syria. Its dilemma is that too much support for Mr Assad risks a future regime booting it out of Tartus, which is valued by Russian spooks and electronic snoopers. But too little may mean defeat for an old ally.⁷⁰

There are even more basic reasons for Russian support to the Assad regime: Syria owes \$3.6 billion to Russia, due to be repaid by 2015, and has important interests in Syria's oil extraction industry and has \$4.5 billion of active arms contracts with the Syrian government.⁷¹ If the Assad regime were to fall, these contracts and debts could well be written off.

Russia also opposes intervention because it is still smarting from the Libyan campaign, where Russia feels that it was outmanoeuvred by the West, allowing Nato to bring about regime change in Libya, exceeding the terms of UN Security Council resolution 1973. Added to this is the sense that Russia wants to be an independent actor and it wants to be indispensable for the resolution of the Syrian crisis, which will add to Russian prestige and underline its importance in comparison to the EU, for example, which it sees as a cheerleader for US policy.

Lastly, there are clear reasons why Russia's elite could be hostile to mass protests attracting outside help in order to bring down authoritarian governments. Russia itself experienced the biggest anti-government demonstrations in a generation recently.

Russia wants Iran to participate in negotiations over the future in Syria, something which the US administration rejects. Iran's inclusion is also supported by Kofi Annan, the UN envoy. At the conference in Geneva, held on 30 June in Geneva, Russia dropped its initial insistence that Iran should be included. The event was attended by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State. The final communiqué called for the parties to follow the Annan plan.⁷² A phrase that called for the exclusion from a transitional government of any parties that might undermine the transition, proposed by Annan, was reportedly dropped at Russian insistence.⁷³

Moscow had already signalled some impatience with the Syrian government on 20 March, when foreign minister Lavrov said: "We believe the Syrian leadership reacted wrongly to the first appearance of peaceful protests and ... is making very many mistakes," in their handling of the uprising.⁷⁴

Recently there have been further signs that the Russian government has decided to distance itself from al-Assad. In July, it decided to suspend arms shipments to Syria. This included an order for 36 Yak-130 fighter trainers. A defence official said:

Russia, as well as other countries, is concerned by the situation in Syria. We are not talking about new arms supplies to that country. Until the situation stabilizes we will not deliver any new weapons [to Syria].⁷⁵

Events in Syria may solve Russia's dilemma. If the outlook for the Assad regime continues to deteriorate quickly, it will become increasingly difficult for the Russian government to continue to appear to back it.

⁷⁰ "Syria and Russia: Wait and see", *Economist*, 14 January 2012

⁷¹ Matthew Rojansky, "The Method to Putin's Syria Madness", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 March 2012

⁷² UNwatch, [Full text: Action Group for Syria – Final Communiqué](#), 30 June 2012

⁷³ "Syria conference fails to specify plan for Assad", *Washington Post*, 1 July 2012

⁷⁴ "Russia says Syrian leadership has made many mistakes", *Reuters*, 20 March 2012

⁷⁵ "Russia stops sale of new weapons to Syria", *UPI*, 9 July 2012

China

China denies being an arms supplier to Syria, although there are reports of China assisting in the development of Syrian ballistic missiles. China participates commercially in Syrian oil: the China National Petroleum Company owns part of the al-Furat oil company, Syria's main producer.⁷⁶

According to an article from the Jamestown Foundation, a US research institute, China is primarily interested in Syria as a trade hub, with its strategic location near fast-growing African and Gulf economies. Its free trade agreements with the EU are particularly interesting to the Chinese (sanctions were not in place at the time):

Other than its geographic location as a terminus node on the ancient Silk Road, and hub for trade between the three continents of Africa, Asia and Europe, there are many reasons for China's interest in Syria. First, it can serve as China's gateway for European market access in the face of increasing protectionist pressures from larger countries such as France, Germany and Great Britain within the European Union (EU).⁷⁷

China also shares Russian concerns about the violation of sovereignty and perhaps about encouraging street protests. With the legitimacy of the Chinese system often questioned and the Tiananmen Square events still very relevant in China, the People's Republic remains sensitive about popular uprisings.

China has sometimes appeared reluctant in following the Russian line but, like the Russians, Chinese leaders are worried that the West's position is encouraging civil war and discouraging a negotiated solution. A UK-based academic put it this way:

There is some kind of encouragement of the [Syrian] opposition not to accept any kind of political solution and keep fighting, and this call for Assad to step down. Beijing is very concerned, obviously, about how the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the Syrian situation is undermined by such rhetoric.⁷⁸

Iran

The Syrian government is said to be receiving significant money (as well as technical and moral support) from Iran, which is reported to be helping sell some Syrian oil. According to US officials, Iran has supplied weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) for surveillance, and given Syria help in monitoring and censoring internet traffic, to which the US has responded with further sanctions.⁷⁹

On 1 August 2012, as the pace of defections quickened, it was reported that Iran had sent its highest level delegation yet to Damascus. Saeed Jalili, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, said in Damascus that only a Syrian solution would resolve the crisis.⁸⁰

While there are many reports of more substantial help to the government, particularly of the presence of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard,⁸¹ these are difficult to verify. One suggestion of deeper involvement emerged when rebels captured a bus load of Iranians in

⁷⁶ "Oil companies may follow suit after Shell pulls out of Syria", *Gulfnews.com*, 4 December 2012

⁷⁷ "Syria in China's New Silk Road Strategy", Jamestown Foundation, 16 April 2010.

⁷⁸ Professor Zhang Yongjin of the University of Bristol quoted in "China: US and allies push Syria into civil war", *Russia Today*, 21 February 2012

⁷⁹ "Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials", *Reuters*, 23 March 2012

⁸⁰ "Syria's Bashar al-Assad makes rare TV appearance" *BBC News Online*, 7 August 2012

⁸¹ For more on this see the Library briefing *The Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard*, October 2007

Damascus. Iran at first said they were pilgrims visiting Shiite holy sites and blamed the US for their capture, because of US ‘funding for terrorist groups’. Two days later, on 8 August, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, said that the bus had contained retired members of the Revolutionary Guard and other soldiers, and government officials,⁸² lending some credence to the rebels’ claims that the Iranians were on a reconnaissance mission for the Iranian government. Despite such clues, Iran does not appear to have made a decision to act decisively to swing the conflict in favour of their ally. Doubtless, like Western countries, they are aware of the practical difficulties involved.

Tehran has called for a negotiated settlement of the crisis and wants a seat at the table. Russia, China and, cautiously, Kofi Annan have said that Iran could play a constructive role. So far, however, the Islamic Republic has been excluded. Tehran did not, for example, get a seat at the Geneva conference on 30 June. A White House spokesman said in July that Iran would play a counterproductive role because it aims to keep al-Assad in power, but he did not rule Iranian participation out entirely:

I think Iran’s role has not been productive or helpful. Our interest is in working with nations that want to see stability in Syria, want to see an end to the bloodshed, want to see a democratic future for the Syrian people. I’m not excluding anything.⁸³

The US does not want to give Iran any leverage in the Syrian situation, partly because Iran’s goals are completely opposed to US goals. But also because it does not want to give any power to Iran in its other disputes with the US, which might become linked. Iran could offer concessions in Syria in exchange for US moves in Afghanistan, on the nuclear issue or other policy areas where the US and Iran are opposed.

It is not only the US that is resisting Iranian participation. According to reports, Turkey insisted on Iran’s absence from Geneva.⁸⁴ In spite of exclusion from talks, Iran has some leverage over the situation in Syria.

Iran’s policy of supporting al-Assad is looking increasingly problematic as the survival of the Alawite regime becomes less likely. As the conflict becomes ever bloodier and takes on a more sectarian aspect, the chances of any successor regime having friendly relations with Shiite Iran are receding. However, some analysts have suggested that Iran will not easily give up its ally and could yet decide to commit far larger resources to Syria.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has, like Turkey, taken a strong line against the Syrian government. In November 2011, King Abdullah told Syria to “stop the killing machine” and said that the government should “think wisely before it is too late and issue and enact reforms.”⁸⁵ Such strong language and such clear backing for reform are both unusual from the Saudi government. They might also be taken as somewhat hypocritical from a leader often criticised for failing to open up the Saudi political system. But they should be seen in the light of the Arab/Persian and Sunni/Shia divides in Middle Eastern politics – something that looms very large in the world view of the Saudis.

For Saudi Arabia, the great prize in the Syrian crisis would be to deprive Iran of its principal ally in the Arab world and to weaken the Shiite resurgence whose biggest milestone was the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the establishment of a Shiite-led government there. To

⁸² “Iran says retired Guards among hostages held in Syria”, *BBC News Online*, 8 August 2012

⁸³ White House, [Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney](#), 7 July 2012

⁸⁴ “Fear of Iran and Syrian Bloodletting”, *The Diplomat*, 9 July 2012

⁸⁵ “Saudi King Abdullah to Syria: ‘Stop the killing machine’”, *Washington Post*, 8 August 2011

weaken Iran in that way would be a significant boost to Saudi Arabia's claim to be the dominant regional power.

In March 2012 a number of bombs were exploded in Damascus and Aleppo, killing some 29 people. The Syrian government blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for arming the rebels and inciting terrorism, while the Syrian National Council said that the government itself was to blame for the attacks, to vindicate its claim that it was fighting al-Qaeda-style terrorists. Western diplomats are not sure who planted the bombs and it is unclear how much the Saudi or Qatari governments (or for that matter, rich individuals from the Gulf) are doing to arm the opposition in Syria.⁸⁶

Lebanon

One of the great fears is that the unrest in Syria could spread to Lebanon. Lebanon's history of sectarian strife is well known. The political settlement that halted the civil war and gave each community an accepted position in the state is fragile and has not managed to stop a string of assassinations and armed clashes from taking place. However, Lebanon has been relatively peaceful in recent years, apart from the war between Hizbollah and Israel in 2006.

Syrian government troops fired into Lebanese territory and, in July 2012, briefly kidnapped two Lebanese security officials on Lebanese territory, after a rocket had been fired into Syria from the area.⁸⁷ Worse has been the escalation of sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Syrian Sunnis, many of whom have traditionally found work in Lebanon, are reported to be encountering growing hostility from Shia Lebanese and some have gone home.

In June 2012, Riad al-Asaad, leader of the Free Syrian Army, told a reporter that Hizbollah was already involved in helping the Syrian government within Syria, particularly in the towns of Talkalakh and Homs.⁸⁸ There has also been a spate of kidnappings in the country, culminating in the kidnapping of over two dozen Syrians, a Turk and one Saudi citizen on 15 August by a Lebanese Shiite clan, the Meqdad. The Meqdad took the action in retaliation for the kidnapping of one of their clan members in Damascus.⁸⁹ The day after, Gulf states Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates advised all their nationals to leave Lebanon immediately.

An anonymous senior politician was quoted as saying that the chaos in Syria had now reached Lebanon:

What happened today is a clear indication that we are [on] the brink of major chaos in Lebanon. The storm in Syria has reached Lebanon now and there is no going back.⁹⁰

Other neighbours

Jordan has received thousands of Syrian refugees but, until summer 2012, kept its distance from the conflict. As Jordanian public opinion has become more outraged by the bloodshed, the government has shifted its position and now calls more strongly for a political transition.⁹¹ Jordan's position is still that there should be no outside military intervention in Syria. Nevertheless, diplomatic sources are reported to say that Jordanian special forces are

⁸⁶ "Syria accuses Saudis over bomb attacks on its cities", *Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 2012

⁸⁷ "Syrian army detains Lebanese General Security members", *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 3 July 2012

⁸⁸ "Free Syria Army: Hezbollah present on the battlefield", *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 27 June 2012

⁸⁹ "With surge in kidnappings, Lebanon veers toward 'major chaos', *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 16 August 2012

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ "Jordan toughens stance over Assad", *Financial Times*, 16 August 2012

preparing for a role in entering Syria and securing Syrian weapons of mass destruction. The US is reported to be helping the Jordanians train for this role.⁹²

Israel, which was even exploring the possibility of a rapprochement with Syria before the Arab uprisings began, has adopted a low profile on the situation in Syria. In the past, notions that the Assad regime was better than the uncertainty of a possibly Islamic-based alternative were widespread. However, a number of factors have persuaded Israel that the fall of the present regime could be beneficial. The discovery of the Syrian nuclear plant which Israel destroyed in 2007 helped to change Israeli opinions. Most of all, the looming crisis with the Assads' ally in Tehran means that mainstream opinion has moved against the Syrian regime. Israelis are reported to believe now that Assad must eventually fall.⁹³

The increasing violence in **Iraq** was highlighted on 16 August, when at least 22 were killed in a wave of bomb attacks.⁹⁴ Since the departure of US troops at the end of 2011 the number of bombings and other attacks has risen to the highest level for a number of years. The violence is aimed at destabilising the Shia-led government in Baghdad, and is not a result of the chaos in Syria. However, with fighters linked to al-Qaeda demonstrating their ability to wreak havoc, the possibility that they may move in greater numbers into Syria is causing concern.

3.6 International mediation – the Arab League and the Security Council

With violence spreading over Syria, the UN Security Council voted on its first resolution relating to the crisis on 4 October 2011.⁹⁵ The draft resolution had expressed deep concern over the violence and strongly condemned “the continued grave and systematic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities.” Urging “all sides to reject violence and extremism,” the draft called for

an inclusive Syrian-led political process conducted in an environment free from violence, fear, intimidation and extremism, and aimed at effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of Syria’s population.⁹⁶

The draft received nine votes in favour and four abstentions (Brazil, India, Lebanon and South Africa); Russia and China vetoed the measure. US UN ambassador Susan Rice described as a “ruse” the Russian suggestion that the resolution would lead to military intervention in Syria.

Arab League

The Arab League had for some time been working with Syrian representatives. On 2 November, it adopted a peace plan and welcomed the Syrian government’s agreement to implement the plan. On 12 November, after the League had come to the conclusion that the Syrian government had no intention of implementing the provisions, Syria was suspended from the League and Qatar’s foreign minister, chairing the League, said that it would consider sanctions.

An observer mission arrived in Syria on 26 December but it was beset by doubts from the start. Observers said that it was under-resourced and that it was being controlled by the Syrian authorities in what it could see. Accusing Syria of failing to take the Arab League initiative seriously and failing to halt the violence, observers started to leave Syria. On 24 January, the Gulf Cooperation Council called on the Security Council to take responsibility for

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ “Israel feels mixed emotions over Syria”, *Financial Times*, 22 March 2011

⁹⁴ “Wave of attacks in northern, central Iraq kill 22”, Associated Press, 16 August 2012

⁹⁵ The draft is available on the UN website: [S/2011/612](#), 4 October 2011

⁹⁶ “[Russia and China veto draft Security Council resolution on Syria](#)”, UN press release, 4 October 2011

getting Syria to adopt the peace plan and on 28 January, the observer mission was suspended.

The peace plan called for Bashar al-Assad to hand power to a national unity government under the present vice president within two months and for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held within six months. The plan has similarities to the one under which the Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, left power recently.

The second draft Security Council resolution and its aftermath

There had been several versions of the draft resolution before the one that was finally presented for vote by the Moroccan delegation on 1 February.⁹⁷ As in November 2011, Russia was reported to be concerned that the resolution would be used as an excuse for Western countries to mount a military intervention and effect regime change. In response to those concerns, wording had been inserted into the draft explicitly ruling out the use of the resolution as a pretext for future military intervention.

Other provisions had also been removed, one imposing an arms embargo on Syria and another calling for Arab League sanctions to be imposed by other states.

The draft finally presented to the Council would have expressed grave concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria and would have condemned widespread gross violations of human rights and “all violence, irrespective of where it comes from.” It would also have called for the implementation of the Arab League’s peace plan, which demanded that Syria should immediately stop all violence and protect its population; release all persons detained arbitrarily; withdraw all military and armed forces from cities and towns; and guarantee the freedom to hold peaceful demonstrations. The plan also called for “an inclusive Syrian-led political process conducted in an environment free from violence, fear, intimidation and extremism, and aimed at effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people.”⁹⁸

French representative said: “It is a sad day for the Council, a sad day for Syrians, and a sad day for all friends of democracy.” He also described the suggestion that the text would be the basis of military action as “obviously false”.⁹⁹

Susan Rice, for the United States, said that the US delegation was “disgusted” that the vote of two members had prevented the Security Council from addressing a serious threat to peace.¹⁰⁰ Some Council members, she said, had chosen to “sell out the Syrian people to shield a craven tyrant”.

The UN summarised the Russian UN delegation’s comments as follows:

VITALY CHURKIN (Russian Federation) said the bloodshed and violence in Syria must be ended immediately, adding that his country was taking direct action and planned to hold a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad on 7 February. While the Russian Federation was committed to finding a solution to the crisis, some influential members of the international community had been undermining the possibility of a peaceful settlement by advocating a change of regime. The draft resolution voted down today sought to send an “unbalanced” message to Syria, he said, adding that it did not

⁹⁷ The draft is available on the UN website: [S/2012/77](#), 4 February 2012

⁹⁸ “Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China veto text supporting Arab Leagues proposed peace plan”, UN Security Council press notice, 4 February 2012

⁹⁹ “Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China veto text supporting Arab Leagues proposed peace plan”, UN Security Council press notice, 4 February 2012

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

accurately reflect the situation there. No proposal had been made to end attacks by armed groups, or their association with extremists, he said, adding that his delegation had, therefore, voted against the text. The Russian Federation greatly regretted the results of the Council's joint work, and hoped that a successful Syrian political process would take place, he said, emphasizing that the Russian Federation would continue to work towards that goal.¹⁰¹

Over the weekend of the negotiations at the Security Council, an upsurge of violence was reported.

On 6 February, the US closed its Syrian embassy and on 7 February, Gulf Arab states announced that they were expelling Syrian ambassadors from their capitals and recalling their ambassadors from Damascus.

Also on 7 February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Damascus. He was greeted by cheering crowds of Assad supporters. After the meeting, Mr Lavrov said that the Syrian government was willing to initiate a dialogue:

It is clear that efforts to end violence must be accompanied by the starting of a dialogue among all political forces. Today we have received from the Syrian president a confirmation of his readiness to facilitate such work.¹⁰²

He also suggested that Mr Assad had been told that the violence must be controlled:

We have every reason to believe that the signal that we've brought here to move along in a more active manner along all directions has been heard. In particular, President Assad assured [us] that he is fully committed to the task of a cessation of violence, from whatever source it comes.¹⁰³

If Moscow was hoping for a reduction in state violence to demonstrate its influence over Damascus, that appeared not to be forthcoming. Opposition groups in Syria complained that the government's assault on their positions, which had already been stepped up over the weekend of the Security Council negotiations, intensified even further.

The General Assembly passed a motion on 16 February that "closely mirrored" the language of the vetoed Security Council resolution.¹⁰⁴

On 1 March, the UN Human Rights Council passed a motion expressing grave concern at the situation in Syria, and "in particular the ongoing human rights violations and use of violence by the Syrian authorities against its population".¹⁰⁵ The resolution went on to call on the Syrian government to stop human rights violations.¹⁰⁶

In an important demonstration of unity, the Security Council issued a press statement on the same day calling for UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, to be given full access to assess the humanitarian situation in Syria. On 10 March Baroness Amos received permission to visit Syria (see below).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² "Al-Asad ready for dialogue with all Syrian political forces – Lavrov", *Interfax News Agency*, 7 February 2012

¹⁰³ "Syria opposition dismisses Assad assurances", *BBC News Online*, 8 February 2012

¹⁰⁴ General Assembly adopts resolution strongly condemning "widespread and systematic" human rights violations by the Syrian authorities, UN press release, 16 February 2012

¹⁰⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, [The escalating grave human rights violations and deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic \(A/HRC/19/L.1/Rev.1\)](#), 1 March 2012

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

After the failure of the Security Council to pass a resolution on 4 February, negotiations began on a possible new one. The new draft removed references to the Arab League peace plan, which called on Bashar al-Assad to step aside in favour of a transitional government led by the Vice President. This smacked too much of regime change for Russia and China.

The main remaining sticking point was the language used to describe the violence, and whether it should give equal weight to state and opposition behaviour. Russia's position remained that any resolution should criticise the use of force on both sides. Other members of the Security Council maintained that the Syrian government's violent suppression of the protests had been the original cause of the conflict, and that there was no comparison between the heavy weaponry used by the state and the opposition. Also problematic was the wording of the call for withdrawal of armed forces, and of the Council's proposed follow-up of the situation and further measures.¹⁰⁷

The Annan initiative and six-point plan

In March, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was appointed as joint envoy by the UN and the Arab League. He visited Damascus on 10 March to hold talks about a possible ceasefire between security forces and protesters, after which President Assad said that he could support "any honest effort" to find a solution, but refused to enter any political negotiations while "armed terrorist groups" were operating.¹⁰⁸

On 21 March a 'Presidential Statement' was released by the Security Council. Unlike a Security Council resolution, the statement has no legal force. In the statement, the Security Council pledged to support the Annan plan and set out its content:

...the Security Council fully supports the initial six-point proposal submitted to the Syrian authorities, as outlined by the Envoy to the Security Council on 16 March 2012, to:

- 1) commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people, and, to this end, commit to appoint an empowered interlocutor when invited to do so by the Envoy;
- 2) commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country.

To this end, the Syrian Government should immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centres, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centres.

As these actions are being taken on the ground, the Syrian Government should work with the Envoy to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism.

Similar commitments would be sought by the Envoy from the opposition and all relevant elements to stop the fighting and work with him to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism;

- 3) ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, and to this end, as immediate steps, to accept and implement a daily two-hour

¹⁰⁷ What's in Blue website: [Negotiations on a Syria draft resolution](#), 9 March 2012

¹⁰⁸ "Syria crisis: Assad issues 'terrorism' vow to Annan", *BBC News Online*, 10 March 2012

humanitarian pause and to coordinate exact time and modalities of the daily pause through an efficient mechanism, including at local level.

4) intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons, and persons involved in peaceful political activities, provide without delay through appropriate channels a list of all places in which such persons are being detained, immediately begin organizing access to such locations and through appropriate channels respond promptly to all written requests for information, access or release regarding such persons;

5) ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them;

6) respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.¹⁰⁹

The Security Council would be updated by Mr Annan and, importantly, would consider further measures in the light of these updates. However, no deadline was set for the implementation of any of the conditions. Unlike the Arab League peace plan, the Annan plan contained no call for Bashar al-Assad to step aside.

However, the presidential statement would not make much practical difference. One regional expert said: "This statement isn't going to push the regime to lessen its repression. On the contrary, it provides it with more legitimacy."¹¹⁰

Kofi Annan announced on 27 March that al-Assad had told him that he would accept the plan. However, the Syrian government confirmed the suspicions of some that it was still playing for time: at the same time as indicating support for the plan, it sent troops into northern Lebanon, where there was fighting with Syrian rebels and some buildings were destroyed.

On 8 April, the Syrian government said that it would pull back from urban areas only after receiving written guarantees from opposition that they would lay down their weapons. The Free Syrian Army immediately dismissed the demand, saying that it did not recognise the regime, and that the demand amounted to surrender. The ceasefire officially came into force on 11 April, but activists said that shelling continued.

UNSMIS

On 14 April, the Security Council passed a resolution authorising a deployment of up to 30 unarmed observers to monitor the ceasefire.¹¹¹ On 21 April a further Security Council resolution was passed authorising an increase to 300 observers,¹¹² to be sent for an initial period of 90 days depending on the level of stability in the country, officially establishing the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). Secretary General Ban Ki Moon was charged with reporting to the Security Council every 15 days.

Syrian government forces did pull out of some cities in northern Syria with the arrival of the first UN observers. Free Syrian Army fighters also withdrew from the main conflict towns in

¹⁰⁹ "In Presidential Statement, Security Council gives full support to efforts of Joint Special Envoy of United Nations, Arab League to end violence in Syria", UN press release, 21 March 2012

¹¹⁰ "UN finally agrees peace plan for Syria – but will it end bloodshed?", *Independent*, 22 March 2012

¹¹¹ "Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2042 (2012) authorising advance team to monitor ceasefire in Syria", UN Security Council press release, 14 April 2012

¹¹² "Security Council establishes UN supervision mission in Syria, with 300 observers to monitor cessation of violence, implementation of special envoy's plan", UN Security Council press notice, 21 April 2012

early April, many of them reportedly fleeing to Turkey.¹¹³ Dozens of deaths were still being reported through April, however, and the patchy ceasefire was further undermined by a series of bomb blasts in major cities.

On 18 July, Russia and China vetoed their third UN Security Council resolution on Syria.¹¹⁴ This one would have imposed sanctions on Syria under the UN Charter's Chapter 7 mandatory powers if the government did not withdraw its troops and comply with the ceasefire as set out in the terms of the Annan plan. The proposed sanctions did not include any military intervention, but Russia still maintained that the West was trying to pave the way for the use of outside armed force.

The mandate for UNSMIS, the Annan observer mission to Syria, was renewed for another 30 days on 20 July, when the council passed resolution 2059,¹¹⁵ contradicting rumours that Western countries would refuse to extend the mandate if Russia vetoed the earlier sanctions resolution. The renewal resolution stipulated that the mandate would be further renewed only if the use of heavy weapons had ceased and violence by all sides was reduced enough to allow the mission to implement the mandate.

Annan resigns

A further symptom of the worsening situation came on 2 August, when Kofi Annan announced that he would not seek to renew his mandate as the UN's special envoy to Syria at the end of August

. The peace plan he devised had not been adhered to fully by either side, and with escalating fighting, the plan was increasingly sidelined.

Mr Annan's statement did not hide his frustration both with the Syrian parties and with the members of the Security Council:

At a time when we need – when the Syrian people desperately need action – there continues to be finger-pointing and name-calling in the Security Council.¹¹⁶

Mr Annan went on to question implicitly the desire for peace among the members of the Security Council:

You have to understand: as an Envoy, I can't want peace more than the protagonists, more than the Security Council or the international community for that matter.¹¹⁷

Ban Ki Moon announced that he would consult with the Arab League to find a suitable successor. On 16 August 2012, the UN announced that the observer mission, UNSMIS, would not be continued. The military mission would come to an end on 19 August, because the conditions to continue the mission had not been achieved.¹¹⁸ A political liaison office is to be established in Damascus instead.

¹¹³ "Free Syrian Army: Sceptical rebels hold their fire, but warn: 'Revolution is not over'", *Guardian*, 14 April 2012

¹¹⁴ The text of the draft resolution (S/2012/538) is available on the Security Council website: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/538.

¹¹⁵ "Security Council extends mandate of Syria observer mission for 30 days, unanimously adopting resolution 2059 (2012)", Security Council press release, 20 July 2012

¹¹⁶ "Opening remarks by Kofi Annan, Joint Special Envoy for Syria, at press conference – Geneva", UN press release, 2 August 2012

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

¹¹⁸ "Syria: UN observer mission to end, to be replaced by liaison office, official says", UN press release, 16 August 2012

It had been reported that Western powers were sceptical as to whether it was worth replacing Kofi Annan. Nevertheless Lakhdar Brahimi, Algerian former foreign minister and envoy to Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq, was appointed on 17 August as joint special envoy of the UN and the Arab League. He would assume his duties on the expiry of Kofi Annan's mandate on 31 August.¹¹⁹ Mr Brahimi told the BBC that attempts to find a negotiated solution were worth it: "I might very well fail but we sometimes are lucky and we can get a breakthrough."¹²⁰

3.7 Sanctions

Arms embargo

There is no United Nations-mandated arms embargo on Syria.

EU

The EU originally imposed an arms embargo on Syria shortly after the onset of the unrest, in a Council Decision of May 2011.¹²¹ The May Decision set out that:

- 1) The sale, supply, transfer or export of arms and related matériel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment and spare parts for the aforementioned, as well as equipment which might be used for internal repression, to Syria by nationals of Member States or from the territories of Member States or using their flag vessels or aircraft, shall be prohibited, whether originating or not in their territories.
- 2) It shall be prohibited to:
 - a) provide, directly or indirectly, technical assistance, brokering services or other services related to the items referred to in paragraph 1 or related to the provision, manufacture, maintenance and use of such items, to any natural or legal person, entity or body in, or for use in, Syria;
 - b) provide, directly or indirectly, financing or financial assistance related to the items referred to in paragraph 1, including in particular grants, loans and export credit insurance, for any sale, supply, transfer or export of such items, or for the provision of related technical assistance, brokering services or other services to any natural or legal person, entity or body in, or for use in, Syria;
 - (c) participate, knowingly and intentionally, in activities, the object or effect of which is to circumvent the prohibitions referred to in points (a) or (b).¹²²

A Council Decision of November 2011 consolidated and updated the May 2011 Decision.¹²³ This was tightened in April 2012, to include a ban on certain goods that might be used for the manufacture of equipment that could be used for internal repression.

In July, the EU again tightened the restrictions,¹²⁴ requiring member states to inspect planes and ships if they have "reasonable grounds" for suspecting that arms are being carried to Syria.

¹¹⁹ "UN, Arab League appoint veteran diplomat to take over Annan's role on Syrian crisis", UN press notice, 17 August 2012

¹²⁰ "World powers welcome Lakhdar Brahimi as new UN envoy", *BBC News Online*, 18 August 2012

¹²¹ [Council Decision 2011/273/CFSP](#)

¹²² *Ibid.*, Article 1

¹²³ Council Decision 2011/782/CFSP (OJ L 319, 2.12.2011, p. 56), See [European Union Restrictive measures \(sanctions\) in force](#), updated to 18 June 2012

US

The US administration listed Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism in December 1979. Under the US *Export Administration Act* and the *Arms Export Control Act*, designation as a state sponsor of terrorism means that a listed country is subject to a ban on defence exports and sales from the USA and certain controls over exports of dual use items.¹²⁵

Other restrictions

There is also an EU ban on the import of crude oil and petroleum products and on investment in the oil industry, a ban on the provision of notes and coins and in dealing in gold or precious stones and many other restrictions. The measures are summarised in a list which contains references to the Council Decisions imposing them, where lists of individuals and details of restrictions can be found.¹²⁶

On 23 March, it was announced that the president's wife, Asma al-Assad, his mother and sister and several more members of the government would be joining Bashar al-Assad and 113 other Syrians and 38 organisations on the list of persons subject to asset freezes and travel bans. It was not clear how the travel ban would affect Mrs Assad, who was born in the UK and is thought to be a British citizen. If she has retained a UK passport, she could not be refused access to Britain, according to reports.¹²⁷

US sanctions are listed in the US Department of the Treasury website.¹²⁸ Like the EU, the US government has frozen the assets of many government officials.

On 23 April, the US administration introduced a new set of sanctions to try to stop the Syrian and Iranian governments from censoring the internet, which the US authorities consider crucial to assist democratic revolutions.. The sanctions target the individuals who carry out such activities and aim to "Degrade the ability of the Syrian and Iranian governments to acquire and utilize such technology to oppress their people".¹²⁹

Also on 23 April, the EU imposed sanctions on the export of luxury goods to Syria, hoping to affect the lifestyle of top members of the regime. There has been media discussion of the high-spending habits of people close to the regime, particularly Asmaa al-Assad, the President's wife.

Impact of sanctions

Economic sanctions are beginning to have a severe effect on the Syrian economy. Revenue from Syria's oil exports has largely dried up, as even China and India are declining to buy it.¹³⁰ The government's cash position has become so bad that it has stopped providing government services such as health and education in some areas.

On 2 May, the IMF said that the Syrian economy would experience a "significant" contraction in Gross Domestic Product in 2012, although it did not give any figures due to the uncertainty of the situation.¹³¹ Unrest and the sanctions on Syrian oil exports would be the main factors in the decline, according to the body. The Syrian stock market has dropped by 40% since the

¹²⁴ [Council Decision 2012/420/CFSP of 23 July 2012](#) amending Decision 2011/782/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Syria

¹²⁵ US Department of State, [State Sponsors of Terrorism](#) [accessed 10 August 2012]

¹²⁶ European Union, [Restrictive measures \(sanctions\) in force](#), 6 March 2012

¹²⁷ "Syria: Asma al-Assad to be hit with EU sanctions", *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 2012

¹²⁸ US Department of the Treasury, [Syria sanctions](#)

¹²⁹ [Fact Sheet: Sanctions Against Those Complicit in Grave Human Rights Abuses Via Information Technology in Syria and Iran](#), White House, 23 April 2012

¹³⁰ "Syria running out of cash as sanctions take toll, but Assad avoids economic pain", *Washington Post*, 25 April 2012

¹³¹ "Syria economy faces 'significant' contraction: IMF", *Agence France Presse*, 2 May 2012

beginning of the uprising, while the Syrian pound has lost 25% of its value on official exchanges and 45% on the illicit markets.

The economic squeeze will not bring the regime down, at least for several months, according to many analysts. The Assad family is reported to have large reserves of cash and income from illegal economic activities.¹³²

3.8 UK government policy

On 6 February the UK recalled the British ambassador to Syria for consultations. Both the Syrian embassy in London and the British embassy in Damascus remained open, however. In his statement on 6 February, Foreign Secretary William Hague set out the steps that the British government intended to take, and these remain the broad outline of British policy:

- Continue to support the Arab League.
- Widen the coalition of states working for a resolution, with particular reference to the proposal for an Arab-led Friends of Syria group.
- Intensify contacts with the Syrian opposition.
- Maintain a strong focus at the United Nations, both at the Security Council and the General Assembly.
- Increase pressure through the European Union and push for agreement of further EU sanctions at the Foreign Affairs Council on 27 February.
- Work with others to ensure that those responsible for crimes in Syria are held to account, with particular reference to the UN Human Rights Council meeting in March.
- Use the remaining channels of communication between the UK and Syrian governments to push for an end to violence.¹³³

Aid

According to a Parliamentary answer delivered in March 2012, the National Security Council coordinates the UK response to the Syria crisis.¹³⁴ The Department for International Development is attempting to contribute to the relief effort for Syrian refugees:

The immediate priority is to ensure that assistance can get to those who need it, and to support UN efforts to negotiate access and coordinate the international humanitarian response. UK support to humanitarian agencies working in Syria is providing emergency medical services and supplies for injured civilians, food rations for over 20,000 people, essential household items for 5,500 people forced to leave their homes, emergency drinking water for 2,750 people, and restoration of damaged water and sanitation infrastructure to ensure access to safe water for over 30,000 people. In addition, the UK is supporting UN efforts to help make food available for up to 1.7 million people caught up in the ongoing violence in Syria, as well as vital medical care.¹³⁵

The UK has allocated some £4.5 million, but the aid effort is hindered by access restrictions:

¹³² "Syria economy faces 'significant' contraction: IMF", *Agence France Presse*, 2 May 2012

¹³³ [HC Deb 6 February 2012, c23](#)

¹³⁴ [HL Deb 19 March 2012, c148-9WA](#)

¹³⁵ [HL Deb 19 March 2012, c148WA](#)

UK support amounts to £4.5 million of official development assistance. We are supporting those organisations which are working to get aid to the people most in need in Homs and other areas. However, humanitarian agencies continue to face restrictions on their access in Syria, which limits their ability to deliver aid to all areas and assess the full extent of humanitarian needs.¹³⁶

The Early Action Facility within the tri-departmental Conflict Pool has already been used in Syria.¹³⁷

Support for the opposition

The UK government supports the Syrian National Council and other opposition groups in Syria. However, that does not mean that Britain has officially recognised the SNC or de-recognised the Syrian government. The UK counts the SNC as “a legitimate representative” of the Syrian people.¹³⁸ Foreign Secretary William Hague explained in a recent answer:

The UK is intensifying its support to the political opposition including, but not exclusively, the Syrian National Council to help them develop and set out their vision for Syria's future. We are encouraging them to work together under the auspices of the Arab League to deliver a credible plan for an orderly transition to a different type of political system.¹³⁹

Mr Hague went on:

The practical support that we have offered has concentrated on assisting Syrian human rights activists to record, collate and speak out on human rights violations conducted by the regime, so that the perpetrators can be held to account.¹⁴⁰

However, the government opposes the arming of the Syrian opposition, as explained in a recent Parliamentary answer:

The position of the UK Government are [sic] clear with regard to arming the Syrian opposition: we have repeatedly said that we will not provide equipment or support for any element of the Syrian opposition that does not comply with EU sanctions and our own export regulations.¹⁴¹

On 13 October 2011, the Syrian Ambassador was called to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to discuss reports that Syrian Embassy staff were harassing Syrians living in the UK. On 15 March, Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt said that there had been no further reports from the Metropolitan Police of such behaviour.¹⁴²

The UK government is providing £8.5 million to support the care of Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.¹⁴³

As the survival of al-Assad looked ever less plausible, in August 2012 the British government announced more support for the rebels. Foreign Secretary William Hague announced that £5 million worth of equipment would be supplied to unarmed opposition groups inside Syria. The equipment would not include weapons, but reports said that medical supplies such as trauma

¹³⁶ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c578W

¹³⁷ HL Deb 17 July 2012, c38WS

¹³⁸ “UK boosts Syria opposition ties, William Hague reveals”, *BBC News Online*, 24 February 2012

¹³⁹ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c485W

¹⁴⁰ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c483W

¹⁴¹ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c486W

¹⁴² HC Deb 15 March 2012, c409W

¹⁴³ HC Deb 4 July 2012, c60WS

kits, surgical equipment, medicines and water purification would be sent, along with communications equipment including mobile and satellite phones and radar equipment. Body armour would also be provided for civilians who were involved in the protection of others.¹⁴⁴

Analysts suggested that this showed increasing exasperation with the Syria National Council's attempts to unify the opposition, as the £5 million was not to be channelled through the SNC. It came amid concerns that money from the Gulf was going to Salafist groups and that these were now disproportionately well-funded and organised.¹⁴⁵

Diplomatic relations

The UK has withdrawn all of its diplomatic personnel from Syria and suspended the services of the embassy in Damascus, although the UK has not formally broken off diplomatic relations with the Syrian government. In a statement to the House of Commons on 1 March, Mr Hague said that the UK would continue its diplomatic efforts in Syria:

My decision to withdraw staff from the British embassy in Damascus in no way reduces the UK's commitment to active diplomacy to maintain pressure on the Assad regime to end the violence.¹⁴⁶

Any UK nationals still in Syria or visiting Syria (against the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and needing consular assistance should contact the Hungarian embassy.

4 What next?

4.1 Possible intervention?

As the death toll has mounted (Ban Ki Moon put the figure at 17,000 recently), there have been growing calls for some sort of military intervention. This remains problematic, however. Most Western governments have strongly played down the possibility of Western intervention and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said categorically "...we have no intention to intervene in Syria. We're not considering taking action."¹⁴⁷ Syria was raised at the NATO Summit in Chicago. However, the 8,000 word Summit Declaration had only this to say about Syria:

We are following the evolution of the Syrian crisis with growing concern and we strongly support the efforts of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, including full implementation of the six-point Annan plan, to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.¹⁴⁸

Intervention and international law

Until the adoption by the UN of the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P),¹⁴⁹ state sovereignty was the basis of international law. Under the Responsibility to Protect, states themselves are responsible for protecting their own populations from atrocity crimes such as crimes against humanity. If the state in question does not protect its own citizens, other states should try all available peaceful means to change the situation. Failing that, the

¹⁴⁴ "Syria conflict: UK to give extra £5m to opposition groups", *BBC News Online*, 10 August 2012

¹⁴⁵ "Syria crisis: west loses faith in SNC to unite opposition groups", *Guardian*, 14 August 2012

¹⁴⁶ HC Deb 1 March 2012, c42-3WS

¹⁴⁷ "Press point by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen following the joint North Atlantic Council meeting in Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers session", *NATO newsroom*, 18 April 2012

¹⁴⁸ NATO, [Chicago Summit Declaration](#), 20 May 2012

¹⁴⁹ For more on this, see the Library paper [Reinventing humanitarian intervention: Two cheers for the responsibility to protect?](#), June 2008

international community can legally intervene to prevent the atrocities from continuing. If the following criteria have been followed, an intervention can be legal:

- just cause must exist
- the assistance must be provided as a last resort
- the acting States must have rightful intentions
- the action must be proportional to the humanitarian crisis
- the action must have a reasonable chance of success

The question is who should decide whether these conditions have been met. The United Nations should be the arbiter but, as is the case with Syria, the Security Council can fail to reach agreement. The UN Security Council has so far failed to agree on resolutions invoking the UN Charter's Chapter VII, which authorises member states to take action to ensure that a threat to peace is stopped. Without such a resolution, the legal basis for any military intervention in the conflict is more difficult to establish.

However, some argue that under the Responsibility to Protect, intervention without a Security Council resolution can be legal.¹⁵⁰ Others argue that the Responsibility to Protect was never fully adopted; crucially, that the provisions to allow intervention without Security Council authorisation were not included.¹⁵¹

After Afghanistan and Iraq, the practical difficulties involved in mounting a large-scale military intervention and, just as important, dealing with its consequences weigh perhaps as heavily as legal considerations.

Safe havens

Calls were made quite early in the conflict for the provision of safe havens for refugees. Turkey has suggested this possibility. An area of Syrian territory (probably close to the Turkish border in the North) would be declared a safe haven and protected militarily. This would allow free access for humanitarian agencies to those government opponents needing their help. It would also allow opposition forces a space in which to organise.

Such an area would be a clear violation of Syrian sovereignty and would probably require a Security Council resolution to make it legal. This is not likely to happen with Russian support for Syrian sovereignty remaining firm on the Security Council. It would also need a significant military commitment to defend the area against attack by Syrian forces.

The example of the Bosnian safe havens, declared in 1993 by the Security Council,¹⁵² remains significant. In Bosnia, the West relied on the good will of the Serb forces. The then UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali initially requested a force of 34,000 troops to protect the six zones. The response from European countries was a strong protest, and the UN then reduced its request to 7,600 troops. In Srebrenica 2,000 poorly-armed Bosnian government troops were supported by some 300 Dutch troops under the UN banner.¹⁵³ In 1995, Serb forces overran Srebrenica, took some Dutch soldiers hostage and massacred 7,000 to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men.

¹⁵⁰ See for example *Humanitarian Intervention in Syria: The Legal Basis*, Public International Law & Policy Group, July 2012

¹⁵¹ "Would Intervention in Syria Violate International Law?", *The {New} International Law Blog*, 9 August 2012

¹⁵² UN Security Council [Resolution 824](#) of 6 May 1993 and 824 of 16 April 1993

¹⁵³ "Srebrenica: A U.N. 'Safe Haven' That Soon Was Not", *New York Times*, 29 October 1995

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said recently that the US military has plans in place for the establishment of safe havens, should it be asked by the government for that. Indeed, he said that all military options are under review. However, he also warned of: "the possibility that outside military intervention will make a volatile situation even worse, and place even more innocent civilians at risk."¹⁵⁴

A recent RUSI commentary underlines the difficulties of applying the safe havens concept to Syria:

...it is ironic to hear the same calls for safe havens being made now, when they were such a discredited concept in 1995 that, four years later in Kosovo, the West did not bother to declare anything other than a general military campaign against Milosevic's forces. For while a safe haven is appealing in theory, it is in practice an idea fraught with peril. Safe havens must be credible: if they can be starved out, shelled or indeed overrun, they are worth little and can in the worst case serve only as hellish, glorified concentration camps.

The threat of air strikes might make them credible. But if the Assad regime calls the bluff and attacks safe havens regardless, what then? The intervening powers will be compelled to up the stakes by not only increasing the physical resources committed, but also expanding the mandate of their operation.¹⁵⁵

A no-fly zone

A no-fly zone would have to be part of a safe haven policy. It would be necessary to have a credible force to prevent aerial attacks on a designated safe area. Not only that, but the surrounding area would need to be demilitarised to prevent the besieging or shelling of the haven from outside.

A no-fly zone in Syria would demand very significant air power. Syrian air defences are reported to be much better than Libya's and, given that the Libyan campaign was reported to have run short of planes and ammunition, stronger US participation at least would probably be required for a credible no-fly zone in Syria. With Western defence expenditure cuts and conflict with Iran a looming possibility, finding resources for a no-fly zone would be complicated.

If a no-fly zone mandate were to include authority to mount air strikes against any forces threatening civilians, as the UN resolution authorising intervention in Libya did, the difficulty of intervening from the air in what is essentially an urban conflict would become obvious.

Again, the Russian government is likely to continue to resist a Security Council resolution authorising any such action, making it difficult to justify legally.

There may be different levels of intervention from the air. According to a leaked email from a security consultancy, the US military has been secretly asked to prepare for air strikes against regime forces. These attacks would fall short of providing air cover for rebel forces or enforcing a no-fly zone, but would be "guerrilla attacks, assassination campaigns, to try to break the back of the Alawite forces, elicit collapse from within."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Secretary of Defence [Leon E Panetta, Statement on Syria](#) to the House Armed Services Committee, 19 April 2012

¹⁵⁵ Adrian Johnson, "[What Ends a War? The Limits of Bosnia-Syria Parallels](#)", Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 14 March 2012

¹⁵⁶ Leaked email from the Stratfor security consultancy published in "Syria: atrocities recalled by those fleeing Homs", *Guardian blog*, 6 March 2012

Humanitarian corridors

A related idea is that humanitarian corridors could be established, allowing agencies to access to conflict zones. On 6 March the Turkish government called on the Syrian government to allow such corridors and the French government has in the past made similar calls. The corridors idea appears to rely on Syrian forces respecting them voluntarily, and there is little sign that that would happen. Similarly, the Red Cross idea of having a voluntary daily ceasefire to allow humanitarian access looks difficult to achieve.

The Assad regime has not responded to the exhortations of other countries and it seems that any 'intervention lite', relying on voluntary cooperation is unlikely to succeed. An effective humanitarian corridors or buffer zones policy would rely on the political will of larger powers to enforce it.

Arming the rebels

The problem with arming the rebels is that it might simply make it more likely that the conflict would descend into prolonged civil war; it is difficult to imagine raising the effectiveness of rebel fighters to the point where they could quickly overcome the so-far relatively cohesive armed forces of the regime.

Saudi Arabia called early on for the rebels to be armed but Western governments initially expressed reservations about the idea. There is increasing intelligence to suggest that some Gulf nations, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are arming rebel forces to a significant extent and offering training, although heavy weaponry is still not generally available to them. Turkey too may be helping the rebels with arms. As ever, hard information is difficult to obtain, partly because financial aid to armed groups often comes from private sources in the Gulf. Western nations unofficially support these sources of support, but analysts have warned that their longer-term consequences may need to be considered.¹⁵⁷ It is reported that Gulf support is going disproportionately to Salafist groups; this is certainly the argument of the regime, and it may be increasingly true.

Intervention unavoidable?

In July, the Royal United Services Institute issued a report arguing that Syria will probably now descend into a full-scale civil war:

The stage is set for a vicious civil war that may be defined by religious and ethnic boundaries, even if it is not about them. This is not inevitable, but it is now more likely than not.¹⁵⁸

RUSI argues that some sort of intervention is becoming increasingly likely, particularly after the bomb that killed four top security officials. While Western governments may be reluctant to get involved, intervention, in the form of covert intelligence and special force operations, is already reportedly taking place. The scale of unrest and the potential for regional destabilisation, the report suggests, mean that Western countries will find it increasingly difficult to remain to one side.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, formerly a high-ranking foreign policy official in the Obama Administration, has also argued in favour of intervention. She said that it is in US and Western interests to arm the rebels, to prevent Qatar and Saudi Arabia from shaping the rebellion by arming Islamists, to prevent the war descending into a sectarian bloodbath that would open the way for al-Qaeda to take it over, and to prevent weapons of mass destruction

¹⁵⁷ [Syria: Prospects for Intervention](#), Chatham House Meeting Summary, August 2012

¹⁵⁸ [Syria Crisis Briefing - A Collision Course for Intervention](#), Royal United Services Institute, 25 July 2012, p1

from falling into the wrong hands. Most of all, she argues, it is in Western interests because Syrians will remember:

Sooner or later some combination of the opposition groups will indeed control Syria. And when they do, their memories of who did what during the struggle to achieve a democratic Syria are going to matter far more to the US and Europe than policy makers presently calculate.¹⁵⁹

In August, US and Turkish representatives discussed the imposition of a no-fly zone or buffer zone within Syrian territory by the Turkish border. Hillary Clinton made clear that no decision was imminent, however.¹⁶⁰ With rebels holding significant amounts of territory, however, the idea of a buffer zone becomes increasingly irrelevant.

The US administration has also been laying plans for more direct help should the Assad regime fall. Plans for dealing with thousands more refugees, holding the security structure together, maintaining municipal services and restarting the economy are all being worked on in Washington.¹⁶¹

On 20 August, President Obama said that use of chemical weapons would constitute a red line that would change his thinking on US intervention in Syria.¹⁶² However, analysts suggest that action to take control of the stockpile would not be easy. It might take 60,000 to 75,000 troops to secure the estimated 50 weapons sites around the country. While Turkey is the most likely route in for international troops, the Turkish/Syrian border is very difficult terrain for large troop movements. Any airstrikes against storage facilities could be catastrophic if the chemicals or biological agents had not been neutralised in advance.

4.2 After al-Assad

Alawite state?

There are some indications that the Alawite elite may be preparing for the break-up of Syria. Much of the worst violence, where the ‘Shabbiha’ Alawite gangs as well as regular government forces are accused of committing atrocities against Sunni villages, has taken place in the border lands between the majority-Sunni hinterland and the Alawite strongholds in the coastal mountains. Some see this as ethnic ‘cleansing’ in preparation for the creation of some sort of Alawite state in the west of the country. Franck Salameh argued recently in *The National Interest* that this is what is happening:

...today’s strings of wanton murders, sexual assaults, torture, arbitrary detentions, targeted bombings and destruction of neighbourhoods—and what they entail in terms of displacements, deportations and population movements—are nothing if not the groundwork of a future Alawite entity; the grafting of new facts on the ground and the drafting of new frontiers.¹⁶³

The ‘Alawite state’ strategy would be very much the last resort for the present elite. Joshua Landis recently argued that the obstacles in the way of creating a separate state are such that it could not happen. It would be a reversal of decades of Syrian policy to integrate Alawites and create a secular state. It would be difficult to defend and Alawite forces would find it hard to incorporate the coastal cities of Latakia and Tartus, where there are large

¹⁵⁹ “We will pay a high price if we do not arm Syria’s rebels”, *Financial Times*, 31 July 2012

¹⁶⁰ “Syrian rebels call for no-fly zone”, *Reuters*, 12 August 2012

¹⁶¹ “If Assad Falls in Syria”, *New York Times*, 6 August 2012

¹⁶² “Obama warns Syria chemical weapons use may spark US action”, *BBC News Online*, 21 August 2012

¹⁶³ Franck Salameh, “An Alawite State in Syria?”, *The National Interest*, 10 July 2012

Sunni populations. International recognition would be very difficult to obtain, and there is little infrastructure to allow the region to function independently.¹⁶⁴

In any event, the Free Syrian Army has put on record its opposition to any Alawite state. In June 2012, Riad al-Asaad, the leader of the FSA, said that he would fight to preserve the unity of Syria:

If the regime seeks the option of an Alawite state to protect itself, we will continue fighting to preserve the unity of the Syrian people. We will not opt for sectarian options inside Syria. Our choice is to establish a democratic state inside Syria, for all of its people.¹⁶⁵

Change at the top?

Some analysts have said that there is the growing possibility of a coup from within the regime to replace al-Assad. Keeping most of the regime's security apparatus intact while changing the top leadership might make some sort of accommodation with the rebels possible, halting the slide into chaos and thereby protecting the interests of the more moderate members of the present leadership. The trouble with this idea is that the more moderate members of the regime appear already to have been marginalised as al-Assad has repeatedly chosen to use force rather than to seek a negotiated solution. Some regime moderates, particularly Sunnis, have defected.

Shashank Joshi of the Royal United Services Institute, argues that Russia and Iran could be moving away from supporting al-Assad to try to engineer his replacement with an acceptable Sunni successor; Joshi quotes a French diplomat as saying that Russian political and military figures have changed their attitude towards al-Assad recently. Such a managed change of the top leadership might be called the Yemen model. There, outside powers (in that case Saudi Arabia and the United States) encouraged a change of leadership and the departure of long-time president Saleh. The changes in Yemen have not changed the basic power structure; protesters are still in the centre of the capital, Sana'a. But they do seem to have avoided a descent into full-blown civil war with different factions of the armed forces clashing. If that could be achieved in Syria many would see it as positive.

For the security structure to be preserved with much of its Alawite leadership removed and replaced by Sunnis would be an impressive feat, even with the support of the West plus Russia and Iran. With elite units such as the Republican Guard almost entirely Alawite, the threat of a fracture of the security forces is clear. If the change were to be achieved, it is not clear how stable the new government would be (the changes in Yemen also may not prove stable).

Another Lebanon?

Perhaps the greatest fear in both the West and Israel is that Syria could turn into another Lebanon, a country deeply divided and in constant danger of a return to civil war. Lebanese forces also have a record of involvement in transnational terrorism and hostility towards Israel.

Increased instability in Syria could be a major problem for Israel. While Syrian propaganda proclaimed enmity towards Israel and the two were officially at war, the reality was different. There has been little disturbance over the Golan Heights since the 1970s, despite the fact that Israel remains in occupation of the Syrian territory. Perhaps the Alawites of Syria in fact have more sympathy with the Israel than they care to let on – and share with the Jews a fear of fundamentalist Sunni Islam and what they see as its “fanaticism... against everything that

¹⁶⁴ Joshua Landis, “[Syria: Five Reasons Why There Won't Be An Alawite State](#)”, *Eurasia Review*, 22 July 2012

¹⁶⁵ “Free Syria Army: Hezbollah present on the battlefield”, *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 27 June 2012

is non-Muslim,” as Bashar al-Assad’s grandfather wrote to the French President in 1936 (see above).

Iraq is another example of what can go wrong in countries that are divided along ethnic and confessional lines, and where there is a history of brutal repression. Prolonged instability in Syria would be bad news for the stability of Iraq, too. While the violence in Syria has claimed perhaps as many as 20,000 lives (this is the figure given by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights), the invasion of Iraq and subsequent years of violence probably caused well over 100,000 civilian deaths.¹⁶⁶ Could the fall of the Assad regime be just the beginning or Iraq-style instability?

5 Conclusion

Syrian security forces have been able to retake towns that had fallen to the opposition. But, as the scope of the rebellion has undoubtedly broadened and it has become more difficult for Syrian armed forces to retake rebel areas, the government has used heavier weaponry. From July 2012, there were reports that fighter jets and helicopter gunships were being used to bombard rebel strongholds. Even greater government firepower could be brought to bear against the rebels, and this suggests that the level of violence will escalate further and that the fall of the regime will not be quick.

The divisions among the world’s powers have something to do with commercial interests, but perhaps as much they are about very different attitudes to power. Russia and China say they do not want to see the chances of a negotiated solution between the Assad regime and the opposition undermined by suggestions of international armed intervention, and this view has something going for it. In Western circles, on the other hand, the regime is regarded as illegitimate, not only because it is in no way democratic and because of its present behaviour but also because of the history of murderous repression stretching back to Hama in 1981 and beyond. In these circumstances, many in the West see no equivalence between the regime and the opposition, which they see as representative of the Syrian people, and don’t see why the people should negotiate with the regime.

Behind the views about what is happening in Syria now are other considerations. Both the West and the Russians are influenced by Cold War-style thinking, where the struggle for Syria is a proxy for a battle for influence between blocs (although a Russian ‘bloc’ is perhaps more hoped-for than real). It is likely that the great prize at the back of Western leaders’ minds is to deprive Iran of its most important ally; this would deal a major blow to the Iranian arc of influence so feared by Sunni Arab states in the Gulf. Russia is equally keen to prevent the US from getting its way in this. Such thinking is unlikely to help the situation in Syria. Indeed, judging by the death toll from proxy battles during the Cold War, it is only likely to lead to more violence.

In its attitude to the Syrian crisis, the West might be accused of double standards. The reaction to Bahraini repression of its Shia-led protests was widely regarded as weak. On the other hand, it is perhaps unfair to compare Bahrain with Syria, where the estimated number of deaths per head of population is more than eleven times higher and still rising.¹⁶⁷

The risks associated with any military intervention are probably holding back intervention for now. The parallels between Iraq and Syria are too obvious. Before the US invasion of Iraq, the then Secretary of State Colin Powell warned George W Bush: “If you break it, you own it.” Do Western leaders have the stomach to take on a Syria which could well descend into the

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

¹⁶⁷ Ban Ki Moon said in July that 17,000 had so far died in Syria. This is out of a population of a little more than 20 million. About 90 are thought to have died in Bahrain out of a population of 1.2 million.

sort of sectarian bloodletting and score-settling that caused perhaps 160,000 deaths in Iraq,¹⁶⁸ not to mention the expense at a time of economic crisis? Helping to bring about regime change without invading would be much more difficult to achieve than in Libya.

For a long time only way forward appeared to be to put as much pressure on the Assad regime and the opposition to reach some sort of negotiated solution. This option is now off the table. The reluctance of Western powers to intervene may be overcome, as the severity of the crisis makes decisive intervention difficult to avoid. To be decisive, however, intervention would have to be on a massive scale. The Iraqi example is again instructive: authoritarian regimes may be able to hold on almost indefinitely despite sanctions so stringent that the health of the population is affected. In Iraq, even the aggressive imposition of no-fly zones over large areas of the country did not shake Saddam Hussein from power.

The conflict shows signs of becoming a proxy war with Sunni/Shia, Persian/Arab and pro-Western/pro-Russian interests squaring up to support one side or the other in Syria. A showdown between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria would be bad news for Syrian civilians.

¹⁶⁸ Iraq Body Count, [Iraqi deaths from violence 2003–2011](#)

Chronology

2300 BC

- Urban centres already exist in what is now Syria. Damascus, continuously inhabited since about 2,000 BC, claims to be the oldest capital city in the world.

First and Second centuries BC

- After the conquests by Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Greeks' huge eastern Hellenistic empire remains. This gradually disintegrates but the rump, that became the Seleucid Empire, continues to be ruled from Syria for over a century. Syria's useful position as a buffer between European and Asian powers helps the Seleucid Empire to survive.

First century AD

- Syria becomes a province on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire.

Seventh century

- Sassanid shahs conquer Syria and incorporate it for a while into the Persian Empire.
- Not long after, Arab Muslim armies conquer Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) forces and take over Damascus and, in 636 at the battle of Yarmuk, Byzantine rule over the region is finished.
- In 661 Damascus becomes the capital of the Islamic Empire under the Umayyad dynasty

Eighth century

- Umayyads fall to the Abbasids and the capital moves to Baghdad.

Tenth century

- Byzantine forces retake parts of Syria.

11th century

- Turks, originally from Central Asia, invade Syria.
- During the Crusades, the area changes hands between Christian and Muslim forces until Salah ad-Din (Saladdin) established more permanent Muslim control.

13th century

- The Mamelukes take over from Salah ad-Din's Ayyubid dynasty. Raids from Mongolia.

16th century

- In **1516**, the Ottoman Empire establishes control over Syria

17th century

- English Levant Company sets up a factory in Aleppo, which is the main trading centre in the region for the next three centuries.

19th century

- **1833** - Egyptian rule established over Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.
- **1839** - European powers support the Ottoman Empire's re-establishment of control.
- Clashes between Druze and Christians

20th century

- Ottoman Empire joins the First World War on Germany's side and sees a growing Arab nationalist revolt
- Arabs petition for British support in their quest for Arab and Syrian independence.
- Under the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of **1916**, the French and British governments agreed, with Russian assent, to divide much of the Middle East into British and French occupied areas or protectorates, should the Ottoman Empire be defeated.
- **1918** - Ottomans withdraw from the region
- **1920** - The kingdom of Greater Syria is proclaimed, including Lebanon and Palestine but this is rejected by the British and French governments and mandates are established at the San Remo conference in April 1920. Britain controls Palestine while France controls Syria and Lebanon.
- French forces are deployed to the region and defeat Arab resistance, occupying Damascus by July.
- **1925, 1926** - Rebellions against French rule, which are suppressed using bombing against Damascus
- **1928** - An indigenous government is established but it is overruled by the French High Commissioner on its proposed constitution and in 1934 the Chamber of Deputies is suspended indefinitely.
- **1936** - An agreement was signed providing for the establishment of an independent state within three years but its ratification is delayed by the onset of the Second World War.
- Syrian nationalists declare an independent republic in 1941.
- **1943** - General election after which Shukri al-Kawatli is installed as president.
- The last French troops withdraw in 1946 after continued anti-French riots.
- **1947** - Arab Socialist Baath Party founded.
- **1949** - Army officer Adib al-Shishakli seizes power in the third military coup in a year.

- **1954** - Army officers lead a coup against al-Shishakli, but return a civilian government to power.
- **1955** - Veteran nationalist Shukri al-Quwatli is elected president. Syria seeks closer ties with Egypt.
- **1958** February - Syria and Egypt join to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). Egyptian president Nasser heads the new state. He dissolves Syrian political parties.
- **1961** - Discontent with Egyptian domination of the UAR prompts a group of Syrian army officers to stage a coup in Damascus and dissolve the UAR.
- **1963** – Coup, as army officers seize power. A Baathist cabinet is appointed and Amin al-Hafez becomes president. A State of Emergency is declared and persists until 2011.
- **1966** - Salah Jadid leads an internal coup against the civilian Baath leadership, Hafez al-Assad becomes defence minister.
- **1967** - Israeli forces seize the Golan Heights from Syria and destroy much of Syria's air force in the Six day War with Egypt, Jordan and Syria.
- **1970** - Hafez al-Assad stages another coup, overthrows president Nur al-Din al-Atasi and imprisons Salah Jadid.¹⁶⁹
- Assad is elected for a seven-year term as president in **1971** and in the same year, diplomatic relations with Jordan are severed because of Jordanian raids on Palestinian guerrilla camps
- **1972** - Syrian and Israeli warplanes in clashes over the disputed Golan Heights and Israeli planes bombard alleged guerrilla bases in Syria
- **1973** – Syria and Egypt attack Israel. Diplomatic relations with Jordan restored.
- Henry Kissinger brokers disengagement agreement in the Golan Heights in **1974**
- **1976** – Syria intervenes in the Lebanese civil war, sending 2,000 troops to protect/control the many Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. By the end of 1976 a 30,000-strong Arab Deterrence Force, agreed by some Arab nations and composed mainly of Syrians, controls most of Lebanon.
- Egypt and Israel sign a peace treaty in **1979**, leading Syria to suspend diplomatic relations with Egypt.
- **1979** - Anti-government unrest in Aleppo. 34 army cadets, mostly Alawis, are killed and the Muslim Brotherhood is blamed.
- The Brotherhood claims responsibility for an assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad in **1980**; some 550 imprisoned members of the Brotherhood are allegedly killed in revenge.

¹⁶⁹ Based on [Syria profile: Timeline](#), *BBC News Online*, 7 January 2011

- Also in **1980**, Syria supports Iran in its growing confrontation with Iraq and signs a friendship treaty with the USSR.
- Fighting with anti-Syrian Lebanese groups, Israelis and anti-government Syrians continues through the early 1980s.
- In **1982**, a violent anti-government campaign by the Muslim Brotherhood, based in the city of Hama, is put down with great brutality by the government, leading to anywhere between 8,000 and 30,000 deaths.
- A number of bomb attacks are perpetrated in **1986**, blamed by Syria on Iraq.
- Western governments accuse the Syrian government of complicity in a number of attacks against Israeli and Western interests and sanctions were imposed in **1986**.
- Syria reiterates support for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war after an Arab League summit in **1988**
- The UK and Syria restore diplomatic relations in **1990**.
- **1992** – President Hafez al-Assad starts his fourth seven-year term in office
- **1995** – Israel and Syria conclude a 'framework understanding' on security arrangements in the Golan Heights.
- **1997** – The Syrian-Iraqi border re-opens after 18 years
- Turkey threatens in **1998** to invade Syria if it did not stop its alleged support for the Kurdish PKK and expel its leader, Abdullah Öcalan.
- Hafez al-Assad begins his fifth term as president in **1999**.
- **2000** – Signs of a democratic reform movement emerge and Hafez al-Assad dies. An emergency session of the parliament changes the constitution to lower the minimum age for the presidency to 34, the age of Bashar al-Assad
- New president Bashar al-Assad announces the release of 600 political prisoners, including Islamists and communists and the control of the press is relaxed somewhat.
- After the attacks on the USA of 11 September **2001**, Syria offers limited cooperation with the USA on counter-terrorist activities. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which Syria opposed, relations with the US deteriorate sharply.
- Tony Blair visits Damascus in **2001**, hoping to persuade Bashar al-Assad to lead Syria to a more friendly relationship with the West, but is publicly rebuffed in a press conference.
- In **2004**, the US imposes sanctions on Syria because of alleged support for Palestinian terrorist groups, military interference in Lebanon, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and failure to meet its obligations under UN Security Council resolutions on the reconstruction of Iraq.
- In **2005**, former Lebanese president Rafiq Hariri is assassinated and, amid the international outcry over the event, Syria withdraws its forces from Lebanon.

- **2007** - President Bashar al-Assad is reaffirmed for a second 7-year term, with 97.6% of the vote at a referendum.
 - Indirect talks between Syria and Israel take place in **2008**, mediated by Turkey, although they do not lead to substantial progress. In the same year, a political solution, brokered by Qatar, is reached for Lebanon. The hope that Syria might consider a re-alignment is revived.
 - In **2009** the US sends an ambassador to Damascus again after four years' absence.
 - In **2011**, massive street protests against the government start.¹⁷⁰
 - **2011** March - Protests in Damascus and the southern city of Deraa. Security forces shoot a number of people dead, triggering days of violent unrest that steadily spread nationwide over the following months. The Syrian government sent tanks into cities in an attempt to quell pro-democracy protests. President Assad releases dozens of political prisoners and dismisses the government.
 - **2011** April 48-year-old state of emergency lifted.
 - **2011** May - Army tanks enter Deraa, Banyas, Homs and suburbs of Damascus. US and European Union tighten sanctions.
 - **2011** June - The government says that 120 members of the security forces have been killed by "armed gangs" in the northwestern town of Jisr al-Shughour. Troops besiege the town and more than 10,000 people flee to Turkey.
 - **2011** July – Unrest in Hama. Opposition activists meet in Istanbul to form a unified opposition.
 - **2011** August - US President Barack Obama and allies call on President Assad to step down.
 - **2011** October - Syrian National Council says it has forged a common opposition front. Russia and China veto UN resolution condemning Syria.
 - **2011** November - Arab League votes to suspend Syria and imposes sanctions.
 - **2011** December - Syria agrees to an Arab League initiative allowing Arab observers into the country, but the League suspends its mission in January because of worsening violence.
- Twin suicide bombs outside security buildings in Damascus kill 44.
- **2012** February - Russia and China block a UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria, The UN says that more than 7,500 people have died since the security crackdown began.

¹⁷⁰ Chronology based on *A Political Chronology of the Middle East, Europa, 2001* and *Europa World Yearbook, Syria, History*

- **2012** March - UN Security Council endorses non-binding peace plan drafted by UN envoy Kofi Annan.
- **2012** May - More than a hundred people killed in Houla, near Homs, most of them women and children. France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada and Australia expel senior Syrian diplomats in protest.
- **2012** June - Turkey changes rules of engagement after Syria shoots down a Turkish plane that strayed into its territory.
- **2012** July - Bomb blows up three security chiefs, including the president's brother-in-law and the defence minister, in Damascus, and Free Syrian Army seizes Aleppo, the main city of the north.
- **2012** August - The UN General Assembly passes a resolution demanding that President Assad resign, Prime Minister Riad Hijab resigns, denouncing the government's "murderous policies".¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Timeline based on "[Syria profile](#)", *BBC News Online*, 7 August 2012

Further reading

- Human Rights Watch, *Torture Archipelago; Arbitrary Arrests, Torture and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*, July 2012
- International Crisis Group, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, Middle East Briefing No 33, 10 April 2012
- International Crisis Group, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report 128, 1 August 2012
- Royal United Services Institute, *Syria Crisis Briefing: A Collision Course for Intervention*, July 2012
- Amnesty International, *Annual Report 2012: Syria*, 2012