

Memorandum for President Assad

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This article provides a Syrian regime perspective on the current state of the civil war, regional dynamics, and prospects for ending the civil war on terms it finds acceptable. It takes the form of a memorandum to President Bashar Assad. It is not meant as an endorsement of the regime or its tactics, but to provide an alternative view that captures the regime's optic on the situation it faces.

Memorandum for President Assad
From Syria's Senior Advisory Council (SAC)¹
Date: October 1, 2013
Subject: Tipping Point in Insurgency Masks Long Term Challenges

Mr. President,

With 2013 nearing an end and the September 2013 crisis with the U.S. contained you directed a strategic review of Syria's current domestic and international position in order to frame upcoming deliberations on our strategy for 2014 and beyond that can lay the base for a long-term stabilization of the security situation in Syria. This memorandum summarizes where we stand on three crucial areas: the military's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy to defeat the insurgency and improve the security situation; an assessment of the domestic political front; and international developments that shape the regional arena. It will conclude with brief observations on areas we can exploit in 2014 and long-term implications for Syria's future.

2013 Was a Good Year

On the military front, the regime made great strides in stabilizing the deteriorating security situation we confronted at the start of 2013. By late 2012, the opposition appeared to have all

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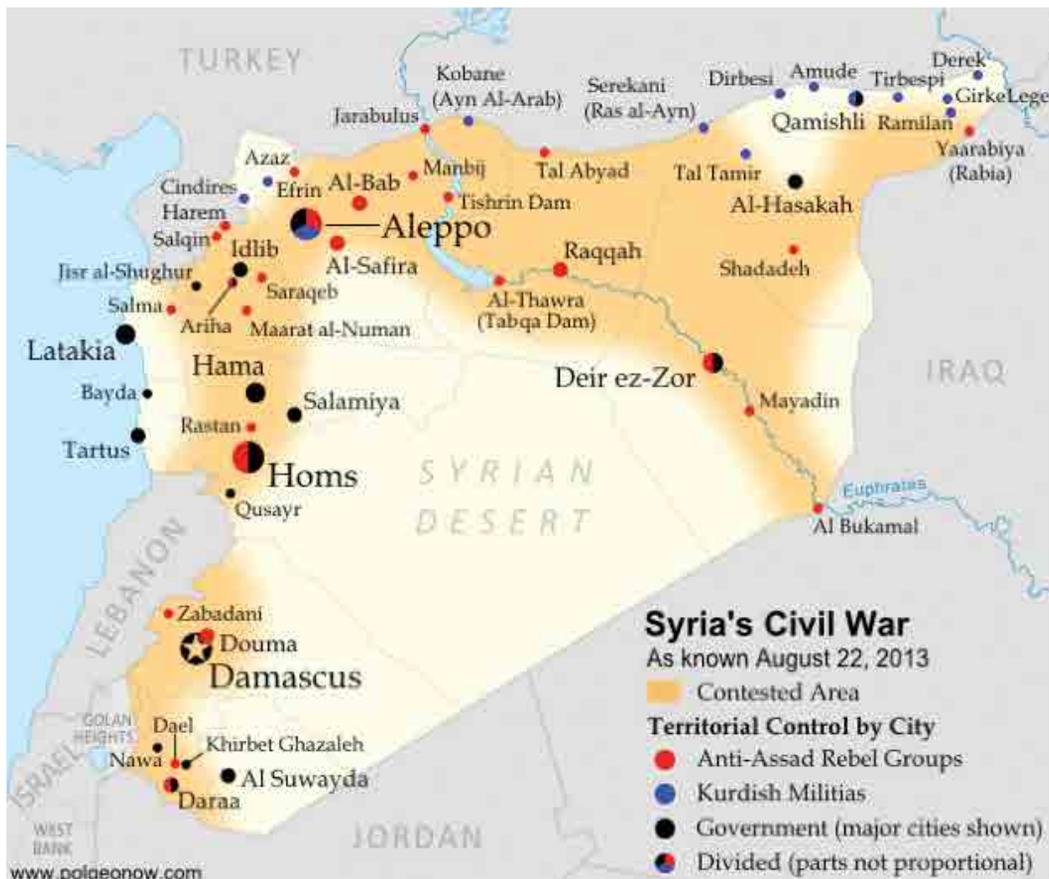
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the momentum with the insurgency's growth in the Idlib countryside, the opposition's seizure of large parts of Aleppo city and attempts to replicate this tactic in Damascus. The regime's fate appeared to hang in the balance.

Nine months later, most of these trends have been reversed; the security situation in Damascus has stabilized and the Army has launched counteroffensives to restore order in Damascus' suburbs and stem insurgent progress in the south near Daraa. In the north, a grinding stalemate persists in Aleppo city and a positional chess game has emerged over towns and villages that control access to Aleppo and our important military installations there that provide a base for our operations.

But the key long-term military gain for 2013 occurred in Homs, where we significantly reduced the insurgency's presence through our efforts in the city and surrounding villages, most notably during June's operations in Qusayr that drew the most attention due to Hizballah's intervention. Control of Homs is pivotal to our strategy of maintaining Syria's "spine", the Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus axis. Homs is the geographic center of the spine, provides the link to the coastal heartland of the Alawi community and straddles opposition supply lines to Lebanon. Aside from Damascus, Homs is the key terrain in this fight. Lose Homs and we all recognize our days are numbered.



On the domestic front, trend lines were also largely positive. The opposition remains politically incoherent and rife with emerging contradictions between forces on the ground, the external arm of the political opposition and the opposition's regional sponsors. The emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and other Islamic extremists as the key armed faction and public face of the opposition, the increased role of foreign fighters, and Gulf support for the insurgents reinforces the Syrian government's narrative about the nature of the uprising and the public's perception that there is no secular alternative to the regime. Strains within the opposition have led to infighting between the Free Syria Army and JAN and these tensions are likely to heighten. To illustrate how the lines between regional events and domestic politics are often blurred, also aiding us was the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) failures in governance in Egypt and the emergence of secular-religious fissures in Turkey that serve to dilute MB cohesion against us. We are at war with those who primarily identify themselves as Sunnis, and there are a lot of them in Syria, but they are also at war with themselves.

Internationally, the regionalization of the conflict was most pronounced in 2013 and has had unintended consequences for our foes that complicates their domestic politics. This has been most pronounced in Turkey where the rise of Kurdish aspirations in Syria and the emergence of Alevi political consciousness have dampened Erdogan's ambitious agenda. In our view, the prospects of spreading instability via renewed Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq, the threat of renewed civil war in Lebanon, and the rebound of Al Qaeda throughout the Middle East have worked in our favor with our

key allies Russia and Iran. These same factors have resulted in policy paralysis in the West.

What is Working

We believe key tenets of our strategy incorporate all aspects of Syria's national power—the military, control over our national narrative, and diplomacy—and they are working. The common view held in the West, that the regime is alternatively on its last legs or simply shooting its way to victory underestimates our ability to conceptualize and implement a comprehensive strategy.

The military aspect of our version of COIN is unrecognizable to the population-centric COIN that dominates in the West, but it is instantly understood by Russia's President Putin and those who have studied Russia's war in Chechnya over the past two decades. Our military, while committed to Syria's defense, suffers from the same challenges facing Russia at the time—a conscript army with severe limitations on the tactical level that precluded a "sophisticated" COIN approach, government resource limitations to fund programs to address economic grievances, and, if we can speak frankly, a corrupt and abusive police force not subject to the rule of law.²

Our military operations are designed to destroy the armed opposition and physically separate insurgents from the pro-opposition populace. This is accomplished through the destruction of wide swaths of insurgent-controlled towns and a forced population resettlement that leaves behind only insurgents as targets for further military operations. This approach also serves as a deterrent for previously untouched towns and neighborhoods: allow the insurgents in, or turn against the regime by expelling its presence, and you will run the risk of having your homes destroyed.

We continue to hold a decisive firepower advantage over the insurgents. Their capabilities—in terms of size, organization and weapons—are improving, but it will be years before the insurgents are our operational equals.

Our public narrative has largely succeeded in maintaining the support of our base—urbanites, minorities, secularists and committed Arab nationalists. We are under no illusions that we can sway our enemies to our side. Rather, our efforts to shape the regime narrative are aimed at our base and an increasing number of fence-sitters who see the conflict the same way we do—the opposition groups are Islamist terrorists (significantly foreign), abetting a pro-US/Israeli/Saudi takfiri agenda, and ill-suited to lead Syria's diverse society. This has induced enough doubt in Syrian society, especially its minorities, to prevent a decisive shift away from the regime. The recent JAN attack on Ma'loulah, one of the oldest sites in Christianity, will reinforce this message.

At the international level, despite the recent flurry over chemical weapon use, we have succeeded in maintaining crucial international alliances (Russia, Iran and Hizballah) and to a certain extent made progress with Iraq because of increased Sunni-Shi'a tension there. Divisions have emerged in the Saudi-Turk-Qatari regional alliance that dominated 2012 with ripple effects that impacts their support for specific factions within the Syrian opposition. This is negatively affecting opposition cohesion.

Bleak Prospects for Near-Term Resolution

Despite our successes in 2013, the near-term prospects for ending Syria's insurgency soon are grim. We are likely in a protracted

period of political and military stalemate and the question now becomes how to position the regime for the long term. There are three factors to consider.

First, the game changer in our current crisis is for regional state sponsors of the insurgents to cease their support. In this regard Turkey and Saudi Arabia play critical roles as conduits for aid and safe havens for the Syrian insurgency. We judge that breaking up the state sponsor alliance arrayed against us is the center of gravity for this conflict; without foreign support the insurgency will die. The primary focus of our diplomacy, and that of our allies, must be geared toward this goal.

At the same time, we recognize this may take years to accomplish. The rapid regionalization of the Syrian crisis complicates eventual resolution of the conflict by introducing numerous state actors with competing agendas. This is similar to the challenge your father faced in Lebanon in the 80s. It took a region-shaking event—Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990—to break that logjam.

The good news is both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also increasingly divided societies as well. We have outlined Erdogan's challenges above and we should not anticipate an end to his political career. But for our purposes, Turkey's ardor for deeper involvement in Syria has waned and is likely to wane further.

With the world's focus on Syria and Egypt, Saudi Arabia's domestic challenges—a generational transfer of power within the Royal Family, an increasingly young and restive population, and the Arab Spring's challenge to its role as leader of Sunni Islam in the Middle East—are overlooked. The latter point is especially important; Saudi Arabia cannot afford to stem the "Shi'a tide" only to be swept away by

a Muslim Brotherhood tsunami. In our view, this Saudi sense of insecurity is reflected by its increased sectarian agitation in the region and willingness to promote the military coup in Egypt that sent the MB back into hiding.

Second, while the military's cohesion remains firm and we have mobilized significant sectors of Syrian society, we do not have the means to generate a military solution. To use the American construct, we can "clear", by great effort and tremendous destruction, but we cannot "hold" everywhere and our depleted resource base makes "build" an impossibility. We are also sensitive to the political impact on our base of incurring high casualties. It is not that we are running out of manpower, it is that we must be perceived as using it judiciously. Aleppo is a case in point. Losing Aleppo in its entirety would be a severe blow to the regime and must be prevented, but restoring the city to our control is not worth the prospects of turning it into a Stalingrad that bleeds the regime white. We counsel patience.

Finally, the prospects for reconciliation talks between the regime and opposition over the near term are equally dismal. Our positions are too far apart and neither is ready for compromise due to the carnage both sides have inflicted. This SAC is divided over what course to pursue at Geneva II. One side contends that discussions over a "political transition"-- a phrase malleable enough to include our planned 2014 Presidential referendum that extends your term--- can be a net gain for the regime. Others are less certain of joining an international process that we do not fully control. We do agree that Geneva II may create further exploitable fissures in the opposition. The late September announcement of a new Islamic block and its rejection of the National Coalition illustrate this opportunity. The

delegation we will send to Geneva II will consist of regime Sunnis, non-Alawi minorities and women armed with talking points about the growing Islamist terrorist threat to a secular Syria.

Looking Ahead

With the military situation stabilized, time is again on our side. The lessons we learned during our involvement in Lebanon's civil war still hold true: some foes have to be killed (Syrian and foreign Islamists), some co-opted (Syrian Kurds and Arab Nationalists against foreign intervention), and others divided and played off against each other (all the above).

A war of political and military attrition exploits our strengths in military firepower and the political weaknesses of our opponents. It also preserves our strength for the long haul.

By playing for time we allow the contradictions plaguing the opposition and their regional sponsors to further weaken their efforts. The armed Islamist extremists will overreach in their goal to impose an Islamic-based government, creating a yawning gap between them and the exiled secular opposition and their regional sponsors, armed moderates, and a growing majority of Syrians who want an end to this crisis.

Nevertheless, an attrition strategy is not a passive strategy. Our response to the challenge we face is being played out on multiple levels and requires a clear vision.

The last two years have eroded Syria's social fabric. As a result, we are now as often a stage as an actor in shaping regional events. The concept of Syria and what it means to be Syrian has come under severe stress. We recognize Syria and the regime cannot be restored to the way it was before March 2011.

Nevertheless, the bottom line on our goals for political reconciliation remain unchanged: a controlled opening of the political system with no political party allowed to use religion as its basis for organization; an empowered Prime Minister responsible for local affairs; and a President (you) with primacy over military and foreign policy affairs and the power to dismiss a Prime Minister. This is a well-worn formula for the region.

Repairing Syria's torn social fabric will not just be a political exercise; it will be an economic and institution building one as well. It is bitterly ironic, but now in retrospect not surprising, that a main leg of the alliance that brought the Baath to power in the 1960s, Syria's villages and rural poor, is now the base for the opposition. Our strategy since your assuming the presidency in 2000 was to build a regime-allied business class that would simultaneously allow a degree of integration into the world economy, construct a modern backbone for the long-term improvement in Syria's economy, and provide both you and the regime a firm base in what has historically been a hostile Sunni-dominated urban elite. We allowed Ba'ath institutions—a key component of the government's presence in the countryside -- to further atrophy and a severe drought in the east compounded the rural crisis. Institution building challenges will be exacerbated by basic security challenges. The state's ability to exert regime control in the hinterland has been severely eroded. With no political reconciliation in the offing, we are faced with the prospects of either hundreds of local bargains to reestablish a modicum of security or leaving swaths of Syria to local self-rule as we gradually rebuild the state. Either solution risks a significant devolution of state authority. We have accepted this situation in

the Kurdish areas out of necessity, but are wary of its long-term implications.

The cost to rebuild Syria will be staggering and our limited budgets buffeted by competing demands for economic reconstruction and rebuilding a military that will view itself as having saved Syria. Access to international funds will be curtailed by lingering regional animosity, especially from Saudi Arabia and Western sanctions. A foreign policy pivot to the East, in which the proposed Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline is just a first step, will need to be accelerated, but a host of secondary problems—an accelerated brain drain, refugee return, prolonged capital flight—will hamper our efforts.

A foreign policy shift to the East may dovetail with another larger shift as we rebuild Syria. The challenges outlined above are enormous and the solution that enables us to tackle them while ensuring control over the outcomes is a return to state capitalism as the primary engine of economic growth and political control. Our limited experiment in a pro-West, neo-liberal free market has failed; a Syrian version of the Chinese state capitalism model beckons.

Syria would not have survived the last two years without the military and security investments in the state made over the last 43 years; a robust military and intelligence apparatus, buttressed by a strong air defense and chemical arsenal has kept foreign intervention at bay during this uprising. However, the recent crisis over chemical weapons illustrates that the very means that initially protected the regime from foreign intervention very nearly pushed events in that direction and risked broader conflict.

If, over the long term, Syria must destroy this arsenal, we face a deepening of a strategic military dilemma that has confronted us since

the end of the Cold War and the 1990 Gulf War. The insurgency has further eroded our already aging conventional deterrent and the demise of our chemical arsenal will further imbalance the power relationship between us and our principal regional adversary, Israel. This dilemma is not new; its roots prompted our ill-fated covert nuclear program that the Israelis destroyed in 2007 and the embrace of Hizballah as a strategic deterrent. The solution continues to elude us, but as a stopgap measure the rapid expansion of a large conventional rocket and missile force and robust air defense purchase is likely the most economical and practical course.

The Arab regional scene is in turmoil with major players (including Syria) consumed by internal turmoil. The weakness in the Arab regional system opens the door for non-Arab players—Israel, Turkey, Iran and Russia—to become more involved in the region. This is another case of challenges and opportunities for Syria. The primary challenge is always Israel, and its interest is to weaken the Arab world further by reducing Hizballah’s military deterrence and the de facto partition of Syria. Yet two of the non-Arab players are our allies and that helps balances the equation. Syria’s Arab regional role will be shaped by our continued Cold War with Saudi Arabia, which is entering its second decade, but showing few signs of abating as Riyadh pursues its sectarian-based agenda. Syria’s ability to resume “boxing above its weight” in regional affairs is captive to maintaining its regional allies while rebuilding state power.

We close this section with some observations about the United States. Relations with the U.S. are likely to be frozen for a long period, placing a U.S. role as a sponsor of Israeli-Syrian peace talks in doubt, and

eventual return of the Golan Heights beyond the reach of your presidency. President Obama at his recent UN speech spoke of resolving the Arab-Israel dispute in the narrowest terms—a two state solution between Israelis and Palestinians. Pointedly absent was a reference to occupied Syrian territory. With dim prospects of an regional peace, your focus will be navigating the competing demands of ending the Islamist insurgency, pursuing economic reconstruction in a way that enhances regime survival, preventing the reemergence of another Saudi-inspired challenge to the regime (both in Syria and Lebanon), and checking Israeli hegemonic ambitions. These are familiar challenges and we have faced them before.

Plan A is regime victory; there is no Plan B.

Notes

¹ A fictitious entity meant to represent a conglomeration of senior regime military and political officials

² An analysis of Russian counterinsurgency strategy is discussed in *The Insurgency in Chechnya and North Caucasus*; from Gazavat to Jihad, by Robert Schaefer