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SYRIA AT THE CROSSROADS: U.S. POLICY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

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Foreword

This special report by the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University highlights the deepening challenges Syria faces two years on, and provides for the U.S. government substantive policy recommendations for securing a multi-ethnic, democratic Syria. This report proposes that the United States prepare a multilateral strategy that strengthens the moderate political forces in Syria, engages Syria's regional and international stakeholders, buttresses Syria's neighbors, addresses the deepening humanitarian crisis, and plans for a post-Assad Syria. In taking these steps, the U.S. and international community can potentially create a political opening to bring an end to the civil war and secure the territorial integrity of Syria.

The assessment and recommendations in this report are primarily drawn from extensive consultations conducted in Europe and the Middle East by Edward Djerejian, former U.S. ambassador to Israel and to Syria and founding director of the Baker Institute, and Andrew Bowen, the Baker Institute Scholar for the Middle East. Ambassador Djerejian had discussions with the former and current UN-Arab League Special Envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, U.S. officials, and representatives of the Syrian opposition in Istanbul, and traveled to Israel this past December to discuss, inter alia, the deepening crisis in Syria. During the fall of 2012, Bowen traveled to the UK, France, Belgium, Turkey, the UAE, Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt and held consultations with government ministers and advisers, U.S. government representatives, UN officials, former members of the Syrian political regime, the leadership of the Syrian National Coalition and other political opposition groups, members of the Free Syrian Army, and regional analysts and war correspondents.

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Executive Summary

Syria, by many measures and indicators, is headed toward state failure. Extremism is on the rise, sectarianism pervades the country, and, with 70,000 Syrians killed and over three million displaced, the humanitarian situation is seriously deteriorating. Spillover to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel is a major concern, and external actors both within and outside the region are working to shape their own versions of a future Syrian state. Syria's chemical and biological weapons stockpiles present a special threat.

Given the absence of a negotiated political settlement and the prolonged military stalemate on the ground, the U.S., engaging its partners in the international community, should act to preserve the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature of the Syrian state, and help the Syrian people develop a democratic state at peace with its neighbors. While a renewed U.S. and EU engagement with Russia is needed to help reach a political solution in Syria—a solution our recommendations highlight—immediate steps should be taken to support and buttress both the moderate forces in Syria and Syria's neighbors, who are vulnerable to the continued crisis.

This study provides an assessment of the state of Syria two years into the conflict, based on our extensive consultations in the region. In particular, it focuses on the capacity of both President Bashar Assad's regime and of the opposition, including their sources of external and internal support and their ideological makeup. It also analyzes the risks associated with Syria's current trajectory of state failure: the growing threat of radicalization and sectarianism, the stability of Syria's neighbors, and the deepening humanitarian crisis.

Based on our assessment, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. The U.S., along with the international community, should work with the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (hereby "the Coalition") to become a transitional government that is inclusive of all communities in Syria and is also representative of former Syrian government officials who share a common vision for a democratic, post-Assad Syria.
2. The U.S. should work with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, and the EU to create a unified international funding source for the Coalition. The administrators of this international fund, preferably a joint EU-GCC initiative, should work closely with the Coalition to ensure adequate allocation of these funds.

3. The U.S. should conduct high-level diplomacy to find common interests with Russia to end the violence in Syria and ease the fears of a post-Assad transition.
4. In an effort to support moderate opposition efforts to protect Syrian civilians and abate extremists, the U.S. should consider, in coordination with like-minded countries, providing military assistance to vetted leaders of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In addition, the U.S., in conjunction with NATO, should form a joint special operations command in Turkey to monitor the delivery of military assistance and provide logistical and communications support and training to these vetted FSA soldiers.
5. The U.S. should reiterate its clear red line regarding the use of chemical and biological weapons, which is prohibited by the Geneva Protocol and the Chemical Weapons Convention.
6. A UN-Arab League mandated peacekeeping force may be needed once the Assad regime falls to fill the security vacuum in the state.
7. The U.S. should lead the efforts of the EU, the Arab League, NATO, and the GCC to buttress neighboring states in the Levant, in particular Jordan and Lebanon, that are vulnerable to political and economic turmoil as a result of the deepening civil war in Syria.
8. The U.S. should continue to support efforts by the UN, the EU, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to address the deepening humanitarian crisis that is resulting from the outflow of refugees to Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as those individuals caught in the theater of war.
9. The U.S. should consult closely with Israel on the evolving security situation on the Israeli-Syrian border.
10. The U.S. should propose to the UN that individuals associated with the atrocities committed either on the side of the regime or the opposition should be investigated and referred to the International Criminal Court.
11. The U.S., along with the international community, should help the Coalition prepare for a post-Assad state.

As our recommendations note, importantly, military assistance to the opposition alone is not a solution. There can only be a political solution to this crisis. What is needed is to combine military assistance with a coordinated strategy of capacity building within the opposition, which can then have measurable results and, importantly, not lead the U.S. into any overextended commitment, including the deployment of ground forces. This strategy can reinforce our efforts to find a political solution to the crisis because a better-trained, organized opposition that is able to make political and military gains could change not only the situation on the ground, but also how Russia perceives the crisis in Syria—and change Assad's perceptions, as well. Importantly, a negotiated political settlement, with a UN-Arab League peacekeeping force to supervise its implementation, is the best path initially to restore law and order, preserve Syria's territorial integrity, and prevent sectarian conflict and ethnic cleansing as Syria builds a stable, democratic future.

As Syria faces this critical moment in its history, American leadership in a multilateral context is needed to prevent the state from collapsing in the heart of the Middle East and exacerbating the security of an already fragile region.

Syria in Civil War: An Assessment

Two years have passed since the uprising began on the plains of Dera'a, and the end still cannot be projected. With 2.5 million displaced internally,¹ over one million refugees,² more than 70,000 people killed,³ and up to 40,000⁴ people unaccounted for or in detention, the numbers alone point to the incalculable human suffering that has occurred. The estimates to rebuild the state have risen to US\$60 billion.⁵ Syria's GDP, at full production capacity, cannot absorb these costs and its Treasury Department has been drained to fund President Bashar Assad's war against his own people. Cities, towns, villages, and families have been ripped apart by violence, and neighbors have turned against neighbors in an increasingly sectarian conflict.

Syria, by many measures and indicators, is rapidly headed toward state failure. This civil war has already impacted Syria's neighbors—Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Israel—exacerbating their own internal problems and deeply unsettling the region. Without prompt action, extremism, which is on the rise in Syria, will invariably touch all of Syria's neighbors. While American diplomacy in the past 24 months has been effective in providing significant humanitarian aid, supporting the creation of a unified political opposition movement and engaging in high-level efforts to try to find a political solution to the crisis, these actions alone have not been sufficient to bring an end to the civil war in Syria and prevent the emergence of extremist groups and sectarian actors capitalizing on this crisis. Given the stalemate militarily on the ground and the deteriorating economic, social, and humanitarian situation, it is important for the international community to assess, debate, and determine what should be done to avoid the worst-case scenarios in Syria.

After over a decade of war in the Greater Middle East and given America's fiscal position, involvement in another prolonged conflict in the Middle East—both in terms of potential lives at risk and funds spent—makes the crisis in Syria one that an American president understandably would approach with both caution and reticence. President Barack Obama acknowledged this recently in an interview with *The New Republic*:

“And as I wrestle with those decisions, I am more mindful probably than most of not only our incredible strengths and capabilities, but also our limitations. In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? How would it affect our ability to support troops who are still in Afghanistan? What would be the aftermath of our

involvement on the ground? Could it trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons? What offers the best prospect of a stable post-Assad regime? And how do I weigh tens of thousands who've been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo?"⁶

Beyond the plight of the Syrian people themselves, the U.S. and the international community, however, cannot afford a failed state in Syria. If Assad continues to brutalize and kill his own people to maintain power—which from our conversations with former members of his inner circle, he will certainly continue doing—and the U.S., NATO, and states in the region fail to provide the political and military opposition sufficient support, the stalemate will continue. This devastation, however, will not be contained within Syria's borders. A failed state in Syria will jeopardize the stability of the Greater Middle East region, threatening the security not only of U.S. allies, but also of American citizens at home and abroad through the spread of terrorism. The risk of Assad using chemical weapons grows as well by the day as he feels more encircled. A generation of young men and women who took to the streets across Syria to call for political rights—people who are now beaten, tortured, traumatized and, in many cases, have lost family members and friends—will turn increasingly toward radicalism and sectarianism or leave their country, depriving a post-Assad Syria of young, skilled, and educated people to rebuild the state.

It is in America's national interest to act decisively to address the political and security crisis in Syria and take timely steps to bring an end to the violence and devastation. First, it is in our interest to safeguard and protect the countries neighboring Syria—Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq—whose security and stability are threatened by the collapse of the Syrian state. Second, it is in our interest to stem the growing trend of radicalization in Syria—specifically, the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of Al Qaeda, which is increasing in popularity due its battlefield successes as well as its growing links with the population and superior weaponry. Third, without the sufficient diplomatic support to bring an end to the civil war, a sectarian war in Syria could emerge, raising the risk of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Fourth, in the absence of action, the deep humanitarian crisis facing the state will grow exponentially, particularly as the battle reaches Damascus, the most populated city in the country where 11.2 percent⁷ of the population lives.

The time is now for American leadership to address the crisis in Syria. The U.S. has a historic opportunity to build a new relationship with the Syrian people, one that breaks from decades of mistrust and opposing interests, and substantively supports the Syrian people striving for an independent, democratic, multi-confessional state that is prosperous and at peace with its neighbors.

As detailed in our recommendations, the U.S. in a multilateral context can take significant steps to bring substantive change to the situation in Syria and help secure its future as a multi-ethnic, stable state without, importantly, committing the U.S. to open-ended

obligations both militarily and financially that the U.S. cannot afford at this hour and that the American public does not support. Importantly, as well, the U.S. can minimize the risks of such actions through the use of rigorous safeguards and by working with our international partners. In collaboration with key stakeholders in the international community in Syria, the U.S. can take effective action. While these actions carry risks, the imminent threats to our national interests argue for a more robust and carefully strategized policy.

Our assessment examines first the state of Assad's regime and the Syrian opposition two years into the civil war. It then focuses on the main effects of the civil war on the region and America's national interests.

Regime Capacity: President Assad and His Allies

Throughout the first year of the revolution, Damascus witnessed rallies with tens of thousands of Syrians attending in solidarity with the regime. While many of those numbers were a product of coercion, there should be little doubt that a large portion of the citizens screaming "God, Syria, and Bashar" was vehement in its support. In August 2012, armed opposition members admitted that about 70 percent of the people of Aleppo supported the regime.⁸ As the conflict becomes increasingly radicalized, secularists are choosing the evil they are familiar with over a potential state that no longer respects the multi-confessional and multi-ethnic quality of Syria. Moreover, as sanctions hit businesses and, correspondingly, devalue the Syrian lira, the regime's propaganda about a Western effort to starve everyday citizens is resonating. Without a strong, moderate option for Syrians to support, the divisiveness will only continue and produce one of two outcomes: a lasting conflict with Assad staying in power, or a lasting conflict after he falls.

President Assad's Resilience

Assad's resilience stems from a strong domestic network of support, as well as international allies who both finance his sustained rule and block international action against his regime. The presidential autocracy—the legacy of his father, Hafez Al-Assad—interlinked military and security services with a strong Ba'athist bureaucracy and a secular, Syria-centric Arab nationalist ideology focused on the president's rule. This structure, in turn, has made the regime very resilient to internal dissent and uprisings. The structure of the minority constituency of Assad's inner circle—comprised predominantly of Alawite elites and, to a lesser degree, Sunni and Christian elites who have benefited both financially and politically from this regime—enjoins as well the survival of these communities with the regime's own survival. The regime also continues to hold the support of many minorities, secularists, and members of the Sunni middle class whose interests have been protected and expanded by the Assad family. While Assad's limited economic liberalization did not ameliorate the high level of youth unemployment, the reforms have benefited his coalition, which, to date, continues to back him.

The army, whose senior officer corps is made up of Alawite, Christian, and Sunni officers, was constructed by Hafez Assad over his 30-year rule and maintained by his son to ensure the army itself was completely subservient and dependent on the regime. The appointment of senior minority officers to critical positions within the military and security services has led to a largely cohesive military, 24 months into the conflict. Remarkably, despite the reliance on the conscription of Sunni youth to serve as foot soldiers in the 619,000-strong military,⁹ no single battalion has defected from the regime. In conversations, former senior Syrian army officers claim that not a single officer in the military is in a position to effectively launch a coup against the president. They also stressed that even if a number of senior Sunni officers defect in the coming months, the majority of the Alawite officer corps is likely to stay with the president to the very end.

Regional Allies: Iran and Iraq

Iran remains the most vocal state ally, going so far as to claim that any attack on Syria will be considered an attack on Iran.¹⁰ The supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has given a personal guarantee of support to Assad. In Iran's estimation, the legacy of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is at stake, as the loss of Syria would mark the rupture of its only long-standing alliance with an Arab state. Tehran relies as well on Syria to transfer arms shipments to Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon.

Iran continues to provide significant financial aid (over US\$12 billion since the start of the uprisings) to the Assad regime and has provided over US\$1 billion worth of credit to the Syrian government to purchase Iranian products.¹¹ Tehran has also supplied predominantly domestically produced light arms and, to a lesser degree, heavier weaponry. The Iranian Republican Guard's Quds Force has trained and continues to train and organize military forces and paramilitary civilian militias in Syria. Hezbollah, under direct instruction from Tehran, has similarly sent fighters across the Lebanese border to assist the Syrian regime in its internal civil war.

Fearing the emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime in Damascus, which could embolden the Sunni opposition in Iraq, and heavily reliant on Tehran for political and economic support, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has also been a source of support for the Assad regime. Baghdad has allowed its airspace to be used to help transfer arms and men from Tehran to Damascus to assist the Assad regime. Baghdad, at the urging of Tehran, has also sent fuel shipments to the Assad regime.

International Allies: Russia and China

Syria's most influential international supporter is Russia, whose vetoes in the UN Security Council in the past 24 months have, along with China, obstructed the international community's efforts to help bring a transition to Syria. Despite international condemnation, Russia remains the greatest contributor to Syria's military, with US\$246 million in arms exports in 2011. Syria accounts for 10 percent of Russia's global arms

trade.¹² Moscow has also supplied airmen to assist with the manning of Syrian air defense bases. Finally, Russia has provided financial support to the Assad regime, including printing Syria's lira.

This support can be predominantly attributed to President Vladimir Putin's calculation that the emergence of an Islamist-backed regime in Syria could potentially inspire and encourage the development of more assertive political Islamist movements in Russia's vulnerable Caucuses. Russian nationalism, central to Putin's legitimacy, is important to take into consideration as well. Not only does a large portion of the Russian population praise Putin for standing up to the West, but Russia also holds decades of strong cultural, economic, and political ties with the Assad regime.¹³ Since the 1970s, Russia has had a naval refueling base in Tartus, which is its main Mediterranean water port. Hence, while Russian officials have recognized the deteriorating status of Syria and the declining power of the regime, Russia continues to support Assad's position in the state. Putin has sought to avoid a situation similar to the one that unfolded in Libya, where the international community used a UN-backed resolution, which Russia did not veto, to authorize regime change.

China also continues to support the Assad regime, taking part in the first two rounds of UN vetoes, and Syrian officials continue to claim¹⁴ publicly that they have a solid relationship with Beijing—noting that Beijing has been helpful in providing advice to the Assad regime. China, similar to Russia, will continue to oppose any attempt by Western nations to interfere in Syria's internal affairs for fear of setting a precedent for the international community to intervene in its internal affairs in the future. Finally, Beijing recognizes the value of Moscow's diplomatic support in vetoing UN resolutions on issues sensitive to China, such as Taiwan and Tibet. In return, China has traditionally vetoed resolutions on issues sensitive to Russia.

An Insurmountable Challenge

Despite the regime's resilience and its allies' support, Assad's rule is not secure and the regime has been incapable of defeating the armed opposition, two years into the conflict. Morale among government-conscripted soldiers is reportedly low as a result of maltreatment by superiors, tough battleground conditions, and limited resources. Defections, while not in a number that have tipped the military balance, occur daily as soldiers see their future better secured in opposition to the regime. In our interviews, many Syrian army officers and soldiers said they have found it immoral and unethical to be part of the regime's civil war against its own people. They did not enlist in the Syrian army to fight their own people, they said, but many have stayed in the military out of fear that defection would lead to reprisal attacks against their families. Others, including those serving in Assad's Republican Guard, have chosen suicide as an escape from firing on their own people or have continued fighting for the regime, convincing themselves that their actions are justifiable.

Despite these obstacles, senior Sunni army officers still associated with the regime expressed that they are willing to defect if and when the armed opposition can guarantee their security and safety. The regime has also lost significant territory to the opposition, particularly in the northern and eastern portions of the state; within its controlled territory, the regime has struggled to maintain security for its citizens and ensure the delivery of basic services. The regime's ability to maintain control of core municipal areas, notably in Aleppo, has also been slipping and the fighting has now spread to Damascus.

An examination of publicly available economic data shows that Syria's economy and, importantly, its Treasury Department cannot sustain Assad's current rule. According to the Development Policy and Analysis Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Syria's GDP dropped by 31.4 percent and unemployment reached 37.4 percent at the end of 2012.¹⁵ Notably, federal reserves have been drying up. The Institute of International Finance believes that the US\$17 billion reserves of 2012 have been cut to US\$2 billion to US\$4 billion.¹⁶ The French foreign minister estimates that, without Iranian and Russian support, the conflict would cost nearly US\$1.23 billion, or 1 billion euros a month.¹⁷ The Syrian government itself estimates that the uprising has cost US\$11 billion (or 1 trillion Syrian lira) through the fall of 2012,¹⁸ with power outages alone costing US\$2.25 billion in lost productivity at current exchange rates.¹⁹

Assad's Options

An assessment of Assad's future suggests three options: fight through to his death like Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, leave Syria into exile like Tunisia's Ben Ali, or try to create a rump state in the coastal Alawite-majority regions of Syria. Two years into the civil war, the first option is the most likely. Assad's ability to step down is arguably limited, with credible reports that senior members of his inner circle would not allow him to do so. Based on our conversations with former senior members of the Assad regime and individuals in contact with the regime presently, Assad is still confident that he can manage to suppress the uprisings and bring the opposition to the table to negotiate on his terms. The military balance in Syria has yet to tip so fully in favor of the opposition that Assad and his inner circle are convinced their end is near. As evidenced by his most recent interview with *The Sunday Times* on March 3, 2012, Assad still hopes to remain in power through the presidential elections in 2014 so that he can try to secure a permanent role for his family and the political and economic interests of his inner circle in any future Syrian government.

The Assad regime's creation of a rump state along the Mediterranean coastline and the mountains bordering it—the ancestral home of the Alawite community—is also a growing possibility. Preparations are currently underway to build a viable autonomous economy in Tartus, the location of Russia's naval base.²⁰ This development points to Assad potentially considering this option. The strategy would allow Assad to stay true to his promise “to live and die in Syria,” guarantee Russia's access to its only Middle Eastern port, allow Assad to continue to supply Hezbollah, and secure Assad a position as a power broker in a post-Assad Syria. Moreover, Iran and Hezbollah will likely continue to try to

prop up Assad, leading to more proxy wars and prolonged violence for years to come. The rupture of the Syrian state cannot be discounted.

Finally, one cannot rule out the possibility that Assad and his inner circle, when faced with imminent defeat, could employ chemical or biological weapons as a final attempt to preserve their position in the state. Members of the regime could also take such action if they sense that Assad may relinquish power. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, Syria reportedly holds the largest chemical weapons arsenal in the Middle East and has the missile capability to launch these weapons.²¹ Such deployment will be nothing short of a red line, incurring external military action on the part of the United States and Israel, at least.

Opposition Capacity: The Coalition and the FSA

Prior to the formation of the Coalition, there was no internationally recognized representation of the Syrian people. The Syrian National Council (SNC), the first main opposition body, made up largely of Syrians in exile with few links to people on the ground in Syria, failed to effectively become a vehicle to represent the Syrian people and led the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Gulf states to seek a more representative body. Formed in December 2012 with American, European, Saudi, and Qatari support, the Coalition incorporated SNC members but also expanded membership to other prominent Syrians in exile and in the country. To date, the Coalition has earned widespread international support, including President Obama's endorsement last December when he declared "the Syrian Opposition Coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime."²² Such backing has been mirrored by over 100 member countries of the Friends of Syria Group, including the Arab League and NATO allies such as the UK, France, and Turkey.

The Coalition: Vision and Representation

The Coalition currently represents the most moderate, most organized, and most internationally recognized political opposition group in Syria today. In conversations with senior members of the Syrian National Coalition and senior non-aligned opposition figures, we found there is a strong commitment to creating a democratic, multi-ethnic Syria that is inclusive of all minorities. We found that the Muslim Brotherhood, despite some attempts to portray it as such, is not a strong political movement in Syria, but has an organized base abroad that could potentially be used to expand its influence after the fall of Assad. In terms of the identity of the state after the fall of Assad, a strong recognition that Syria will not return to its purely secular Ba'athist past exists; secularism and political Islam will both play a role in the new state, according to the individuals we interviewed. Even groups not aligned with the Coalition, including Salafist political groups, voice strong support for a transitional democratic process that would lead to elections and an acceptance of Syria's multi-ethnic composition. Support for the leadership of Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib—viewed as a moderate consensus

builder—was expressed by a number of Syrians we interviewed. However, we recognize how tenuous such a leadership role would be under existing circumstances. Moreover, the Coalition has outwardly rejected the actions of extremist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra, and has proved steadfast in blocking any attempts by such organizations to influence its policies.

The Coalition does, however, need to take necessary steps to be more inclusive of minorities and reach out to the Syrian people through stronger public diplomacy. In conversations with senior members of the Alawite community, we found that there is still a high level of distrust about the Coalition's policies and identity. Repeatedly, we were told that the Coalition was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and that it has no intention to create a multi-ethnic Syria. In conversations, Syrians who backed the regime out of fear that the state was losing its secular identity expressed concerns that the Coalition in and of itself would not respect the secular national political tradition that has dominated Syria's politics for over 50 years. In our meetings, the Coalition leadership discussed their inclusive vision for a post-Assad Syria, but we are concerned that this vision, and commitment to such a vision, could be better outlined publicly. Significant attempts at dialogue between the Coalition and the Alawite community have not been successful but, arguably, the Coalition cannot abandon this dialogue if it hopes to create an inclusive, multi-ethnic Syria. The Coalition has made better inroads with the Christian community, and hopefully these inroads will build confidence for the other minority communities in Syria to engage the Coalition. More Alawite and other minority representation in the Coalition's leadership would be a strong first step.

The Kurdish Challenge

Another key obstacle regarding minorities lies in the largely independent movements by Kurdish populations in the North. Since the withdrawal of Assad forces from Kurdish areas last summer, tens of thousands of Kurdish people fled to Iraq while many stayed and formed militias to protect their lands and people from reprisal attacks.²³ Of these militias, the Partiya Yekitiya Demokratik (PYD) has grown to be the most powerful, boasting over 10,000 men its unit.²⁴ The PYD—which operates independently from Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan region, and the larger Kurdish Supreme Council—has repeatedly clashed with the FSA, and some evidence suggests that the group initially received support from the Assad regime.

The Coalition initially failed to garner support from the PYD, which rejected the Coalition after not receiving an invitation to participate in the November 2012 negotiations in Doha, where the Coalition was formed.²⁵ Recently, however, PYD leader Salih Muslim has shown interest in cooperating with the Coalition to oppose the regime after he held successful meetings with Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib.²⁶ Moreover, the FSA and the PYD have agreed to various military truces throughout the Kurdish-populated regions of Syria, and this has led to a decline in skirmishes between the Kurds and other armed opposition groups in Syria. Even with these positive developments, no single Kurdish political group

has yet joined the Coalition. A position in the Coalition's leadership for a vice president representing the Kurdish community remains unfilled.

Kurdish moves for autonomy in Syria and their separation from the main Syrian opposition political process deeply concerns the Turkish leadership in Ankara. In our consultations in Turkey, the concern that Kurdish political and military movements may empower Kurdish communities in Turkey to escalate their political and military struggle against the Turkish state was repeatedly raised. Kurdish armed groups could also potentially provide future assistance to the PKK, the armed Kurdish opposition in Turkey.

International Barriers to the Coalition's Effectiveness

The greatest barrier to the Coalition's effectiveness as a viable political representative of the Syrian people remains the lack of international support, which is manifested in two main categories. The first is the lack of delivered financial support for the Coalition from the Friends of Syria countries. The international community has responded generously to financial appeals by the UN, with the U.S. leading all countries with a total of US\$385 million in humanitarian donations. While many countries have committed to supporting the Coalition's efforts to establish a transitional government capable of providing for the Syrian people and, in some cases, have pledged funding, the Coalition has yet to receive the majority of this funding. The largest contributors to the Coalition's political efforts—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, and the United States—have pledged over US\$300 million. Having recently pledged an additional US\$60 million to the Coalition, the U.S. has committed over US\$110 million. However, because actual funds received fall well short of pledges, the Coalition struggles to provide even the basics of food, education, and health services to the Syrian people, hampering its legitimacy on the ground in Syria.

In our interviews with Moaz al-Khatib and his staff, the Coalition also expressed a pressing need to centralize international funds in a way that ensures transparency and accountability. Marc Lynch, a leading scholar on the Middle East and one of the more vocal analysts against arming the opposition, argues for “the urgent need to coordinate and rationalize [financial] flows. The uncoordinated, often competitive, financing of favored proxies by outside players has actively contributed to emergent war-lordism, intra-rebellion clashes, and absence of a coherent political strategy.”²⁷

The second barrier has been the lack of international support to bring the FSA's Supreme Revolutionary Military Command and its associated militias into the Coalition. Much discussion has occurred among the Syrian National Coalition members and among American, European, and Arab and Turkish diplomats about such an initiative, but there has been little sustained political and financial support to make this a reality.

Establishing a Transitional Government

As a result of the challenges discussed above, the Coalition has not established a transitional government. The Coalition, however, recognizes the need to create a technocratic government, and is taking the steps to do so. In recognizing that provisional governments are a key step toward earning the support of the Syrian people, the Coalition has begun the process to elect a prime minister to manage liberated areas within Syria. These efforts to establish a provisional government, however, require more financial and technical support from the U.S. and its international partners. Senior Syrian National Coalition officials we consulted stressed that their ability to build stronger links with local and provincial government structures on the ground has been hampered by the lack of broad international support.

The Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army's (FSA) efforts to unify are also hampered by a lack of international support. To date, the FSA still remains what a recent UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Inquiry) calls "a brand name only."²⁸ The creation this past December in Antakya, Turkey, of a Supreme Revolutionary Military Command is intended to unify the FSA under a single command structure. In December, the Command—a composition of the main FSA militias in Syria—recognized Brig. Gen. Selim Idris, a former Syrian army officer, as its head. Like the Coalition, the Command has struggled to receive substantial funding and arms to assist with the unification of militias. The current funding model is based on countries funding militias affiliated with the FSA instead of funding a single command structure. In conversations, senior FSA commanders urged the international community to fund and arm only the recently established Command to encourage FSA militias to operate under a single-command structure if they wished to receive funding and arms. They stressed that the current differences between the FSA militias are not substantial enough to preclude cooperation in a single command-and-control structure, but the longer these militias operate and survive independently, the more likely differences and infighting will emerge.

As a result, the FSA is presently disorganized, lacks training in the laws of war, and operates without an effective command structure. Internal conflicts between FSA militias are not uncommon, and neither are conflicts between the FSA and its sometimes-ally, Jabhat al-Nusra, which they rely on at times to fight Assad's military. Such conflict, however, is predictable when some brigades receive more funding and arms than others. A repeated complaint raised in our conversations in person and via Skype with commanders on the ground is the absence of a consistent supply channel for weaponry.

In interviews, FSA commanders expressed their support for a multi-ethnic, democratic Syrian state; when asked what their future role would be, they said they did not envision a political role for themselves in a post-Assad Syria. Many who served in the Syrian army prior to the uprisings said that they left the Syrian army because their orders went

against their values as soldiers. In fighting for the opposition, they expressed the desire to continue their service as army officers, not as political figures, after the Assad regime falls. They largely supported the Coalition's efforts to create a transitional democratic government. In terms of their vision for a post-Assad state, many of the senior army officers who defected from the regime expressed support for a secular state in Syria; but in other conversations, fighters who joined the FSA with no military background envisioned a state in which Islam played a larger role, rather than a purely secular state.

Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)

Alongside the Coalition and the FSA, grassroots groups known as local coordination committees (LCCs) have formed throughout Syria. These committees, originally formed to organize and plan peaceful opposition events and protests on the ground, have grown into a larger network of 14 committees, with a presence in all parts of the country and in nearly every major city. They have been a primary source of relief assistance and care for Syrians in liberated and war-torn areas throughout Syria.²⁹ The LCCs have also remained a primary source for documentation on the regime's crackdown, providing daily data regarding casualties and periodic reports on human losses.

The LCCs pledged support to the Coalition on November 12, 2012, after participating in the Doha talks,³⁰ and they have since worked with the Coalition as one of its key support groups on the ground. In particular, the Coalition remains one of the top funding sources of the LCCs' relief efforts, having directed hundreds of thousands dollars to the group's humanitarian efforts.³¹

Regarding the FSA, the LCCs' spokeswoman, Rafif Joujati, has stated that "we recognize the Free Syrian Army, but we're not part of it"; the LCCs support efforts to protect civilians while still promoting peaceful movements throughout Syria, she added.³² The LCCs publicly support a political resolution, with an original political vision that affirms "the priority of using dialogue and peaceful persuasion, including the use of noncoercive and nonviolent measures."³³

In addition to established, larger LCCs, our interviews with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating on the ground in Syria confirm a number of competing civilian-led committees in cities and villages across Syria—and in a few cities, the existence of more than one civilian-led committee, which in some cases compete with one another for power and resources. These committees, often referred to as local coordination committees as well, have taken the lead in delivering basic services to neighborhoods across Syria. Some are staffed by former Syrian officials who governed Syria on the municipal level before the uprising began. With a number of militias operating in Syria, these committees have had to, at times, negotiate with more than one FSA or armed militia operating in its town or city, creating tensions between them and the armed opposition operating in their town. The Coalition, with its limited funding, has tried to build stronger links with these committees operating on the ground.

Regional Risks and Vulnerabilities

On its current path, the Syrian crisis threatens not only the viability of a democratic Syrian state, but also the security of the wider region. In this section, we examine four serious trends: radicalization, sectarian war and ethnic cleansing, regional spillover, and a humanitarian crisis.

Radicalization—Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra, the most significant jihadist group in Syria, is an imminent threat to Syria's future. The group rejects the creation of a multi-ethnic democratic state, hoping to instead create a conservative Islamic state in Syria along the lines of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. Jabhat al-Nusra presently represents a minority of the armed opposition, but it is growing rapidly. In our conversations, former senior Syrian army officers associated with the FSA said the longer the FSA remains ill-equipped and poorly funded, the stronger the appeal of Jabhat al-Nusra. Syrians, Jordanians, and Iraqis who have joined Jabhat al-Nusra say they did so because it is better supplied, better armed, and better funded than the FSA. While the U.S. has recently committed food and medical aid to the rebels and Britain has committed protective armor, the lack of advanced weaponry will continue to undermine the FSA's position on the battlefield. Turkey's decision to relax restrictions on the types of advanced weaponry going across its border in recent days signals that the U.S. may be tacitly allowing the Gulf states to supply some limited types of advanced weaponry.

Al-Nusra's Support

Jabhat al-Nusra's strong links with private donors in the Gulf and its access to weapons and personnel from Al Qaeda in Iraq provide it a significant advantage on the battlefield. Originally, Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, received support from the Assad regime as a way to discredit the opposition. However, the regime subsequently lost control of the group and it now is one of the most serious threats to its survival. The lack of cohesion within the FSA makes it very difficult to contain and root out Jabhat al-Nusra, and prevent it from becoming a security threat to the Syrian state.

Support for al-Nusra extends beyond the Gulf and Al Qaeda in Iraq. Some Syrian citizens praise al-Nusra for its ability to distribute much-needed goods and services to the people. In many violence-stricken areas lacking opposition leadership, the al-Nusra front has supplied citizens with desperately needed bread, petrol, and diesel.³⁴ Unlike the poorly supplied and managed FSA soldiers, al-Nusra armies are well fed, decreasing the motivation to hoard the limited supply of food available in war-torn provinces. At the same time, the West's slow response to the crisis has caused increased the disillusionment among the Syrian people—further incentivizing their support for radicals and hurting Western chances to create alliances with future leaders in Syria. Such popularity explains why many former Syrian army officers have repeatedly warned that if Jabhat al-Nusra were to play an important role in the capture of Damascus, it would be very

difficult, purely in terms of popular opinion within Syria, to deny this group some role in governing a post-Assad Syria.

A Dangerous Trend

Since the U.S. designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization on December 11, 2012, little has been done to contain its growing influence in Syria. Rather, al-Nusra has attracted more followers to its fight, with recruits citing al-Nusra's ability to supply and arm its soldiers as among the main reasons for their enlistment.³⁵ Fighters without an ideological affinity to the group have turned to the al-Nusra front, willingly conforming to al-Nusra's strict policies to survive in this theater of war.³⁶ Most al-Nusra leaders are foreigners, mainly from the wider Muslim world, who have been well trained and prepared for battle, and they command an experienced military organization that is effective on the battlefield. Jabhat al-Nusra is often noted for its bravery, often fighting on the front lines when others retreat. In fact, while size estimates vary and cannot be confirmed, Jabhat al-Nusra is currently believed to represent up to 25 percent of the armed opposition—up from estimates of less than 5 percent last December.

The New Taliban?

Multiple media interviews with al-Nusra leaders reveal their intent to create an Islamic state with strict dress codes for women, restrictions on dancing, and even an intolerance for smoking.^{37 38 39} Their preference for suicide bombs illustrates their more radical ideology, and their intolerance for minorities further deepens sectarian conflict.

Al Qaeda-affiliated groups have operated the best in failed states. The implications of Syria becoming such a state in the heart of the Middle East, with an Al Qaeda affiliate exploiting the political and security vacuum, represent a threat to the international peace and security of the region.

Sectarian War and Ethnic Cleansing

As in other countries experiencing an Arab Awakening, the uprising in Syria has provided space for organic Islamic political and social movements. Syrians we interviewed said that this is their first opportunity to freely engage in and express their religious identity in Syria after decades of enforced secularism. The key difference in Syria is its diverse demographics, with a majority Sunni population, a ruling minority Alawite elite, and other ethnic and religious populations including Druze, Ismaili, Christian, Armenian, and Kurdish communities. Importantly, as well, is the absence of traditionally established Islamist social movements in Syria.

Assad's Sectarian State

From the beginning of the uprisings, Assad has sought to portray the struggle against his rule along sectarian lines, emphasizing the vulnerability of the minority communities in Syria and the religious agenda of the Syrian opposition. Assad has been quick to blame the uprisings on "terrorists," lumping both legitimate opposition groups with jihadists,

to discredit opposition to his rule. In conversations, proponents of the Assad regime have falsely characterized the opposition as entirely composed of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood was a prominent social movement that challenged Hafez Assad's rule in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but was largely suppressed by the regime after decades of state control and an active public diplomacy campaign to turn Syrian public opinion against the social movement.

Bashar Assad's employment of sectarian language in defining the regime's struggle against the opposition has been very effective, and has arguably sustained support for the regime among both minority communities who have chosen to stay in Syria and among secularists who fear the rise of an Islamic state in Syria. This sectarian language has allowed the regime to provide an alternative narrative to the conflict in Syria and ignore the political, economic, and social factors that gave rise to these uprisings.

It is important to emphasize that the minority communities in Syria have not completely subscribed to Assad's narrative, despite Assad's efforts to suggest otherwise. Substantial reports of opposition to the Assad regime within Syria's Alawite communities exist,⁴⁰ but those involved have had their lives taken or threatened by the regime. A large number of Christians who have left Syria for Lebanon have also expressed their opposition to the violence of the Assad regime, and their support for a democratic transition in Syria.

As the violence deepens in Syria, sectarianism is on the rise, and the fear of ethnic cleansing is a concern that cannot be discounted. Attacks against both Christian and Islamic minorities have increased in Syria, from the Druze heartlands of Sweida in the Southeast,⁴¹ to the Alawite enclave on the coast,⁴² the Ismaili-dominated city of Salamiyeh,⁴³ Syriac Christians in the Northeast,⁴⁴ and Kurdish populations in the North. Even the capital of Damascus is not immune: some of the earliest terrorist attacks targeted the Christian-dominated areas around Abbasiyeen Square. While jihadists carry out many of these attacks, the regime also bears responsibility for its purposeful targeting of Sunni-majority areas.⁴⁵ In northern Syria, Sunni and Shia groups have gone on a tit-for-tat kidnapping spree in an area where Sunnis and Shia once worked and lived together.⁴⁶ Throughout the country, minorities are either fleeing or, in cases such as the Alawites, moving closer to the Syrian regime for support.

The UN Inquiry on Growing Sectarianism

In December 2012, the UN Inquiry announced that “the risk of the Syrian conflict devolving from peaceful protests seeking political reform to a confrontation between ethnic and religious groups has been ever present ... the conflict has become overtly sectarian.” The report goes on to document attacks and reprisals, the arming of civilians along sectarian lines, and attacks on pro-government minority communities. The study concludes with a call for assistance: “With communities believing—not without cause—that they face an existential threat, the need for a negotiated settlement is more urgent than ever.”⁴⁷

The UN Inquiry further reaffirmed this in its February 5, 2013, report, stating that “the conflict has become increasingly sectarian” and that “the conflict has become coloured by sectarianism.” The assessment details targeting along sectarian lines by some opposition forces and the regime.⁴⁸

The sectarian tensions are becoming more grave, and the prolonged violence will further increase these tensions. What’s more, a failed state will assuredly bring about power struggles between various armed militants fighting along sectarian lines. Such violence will not only lead to devastating loss of life in Syria, but will also impact Syria’s neighbors.

Regional Spillover

The civil war in Syria has already spilled over its borders, threatening the security of the region. Three states are particularly vulnerable to the crisis: Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel.

Jordan

Jordan, a country already experiencing fiscal and public debt challenges, is facing an economic crisis due to the strain of over 400,000 of refugees in the country, according to government estimates.⁴⁹ A study released by the country’s Economic and Social Council estimates that hosting one refugee costs US\$3,536 a year, and that Jordan has spent over US\$834,512,002 on hosting refugees in the past 18 months at current exchange rates.⁵⁰ Moreover, with 38,000 jobs offered to Syrian refugees, Jordanian unemployment and poverty rates are on the rise.⁵¹ The influx of refugees is also draining Jordan’s scarce resources, most notably water. These costs are compounded by a loss in revenue due to a drop in external trade, which is hampered by closed trade routes through Syria and a decline in tourism. Economists attribute much of the rapid rise in public debt, which reached US\$22 billion at the end 2012, to the ongoing crisis in Syria.⁵² The UN now estimates that 3,000 refugees are entering Jordan daily, a rapid escalation of the refugee crisis and a figure that illustrates its increasing toll on Syria’s neighbors.⁵³

During the World Economic Forum in January 2013, King Abdullah of Jordan acknowledged the growing presence of extremists in the region, claiming that “the new Taliban that we’re going to have to deal with is actually going to be in Syria.”⁵⁴ Some of the king’s concerns stem from his own internal political challenges. Despite democratic reforms and elections, the king continues to face opposition from Islamist groups such as the Islamic Action Group, which boycotted the recent parliamentary elections. Jordan’s security services have also had to contend with an increase in Jordanians crossing the border to fight in Syria. These fighters will pose a threat to the stability and security of Jordan if they decide to launch terrorist attacks in Jordan in the future. Jordan is thus vulnerable to the civil war in Syria.

Lebanon

Lebanon is equally vulnerable to these ills. Arguably one of the most fragile states in the Levant, Lebanon continues to face violent spillovers from Syria. Economic growth has

slowed, sectarian divisions have grown, and the immigration of refugees has increased the state's population by 5 percent.⁵⁵ Lebanon's trade deficit sits at a five-year high of US\$16.8 billion as fuel imports have risen to meet higher demands.⁵⁶ According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Lebanon's GDP growth dropped from 7 percent in 2010 to 1.5 percent in 2011.⁵⁷ The Lebanese economy minister explains that "exports are down 12 percent overall, with exports through Syria down between 30-40 percent."⁵⁸ Tourism has dropped between 14 and 15 percent.⁵⁹ With government estimates of 400,000 Syrians refugees in Lebanon with more entering daily⁶⁰ and the current negative economic outlook, Lebanon is struggling to absorb the refugees.

The impact of the civil war, however, extends far beyond the economy. From the 2012 assassination of Lebanese Internal Security Forces Brig. Gen. Wissam al-Hassan to sectarian-motivated kidnappings, repeated violence along the Lebanese-Syrian border and constant clashes among anti- and pro-regime Lebanese in Tripoli, Lebanon's exposure to the civil war runs deep. The European Council on Foreign Relations has highlighted that the more radical Sunni factions in Lebanon see the revolution as an opportunity to confront Hezbollah.⁶¹ Many Lebanese have supported the uprisings through funds and arms.⁶² In our consultations in Lebanon, the fear that Assad will try to bring Lebanon to civil war to distract the international community from his troubles was raised. This possibility is not completely remote if Assad perceives that he has run out of options to save his rule.

Hezbollah poses a constant threat to political order in Lebanon; this political and military organization has proven a reliable partner for Iran, securing Tehran's interests in Lebanon and terrorizing Israel. Various reports have verified the presence of Hezbollah weapons and fighters on the ground in Syria, as well as ongoing weapons exchanges between Iran, Hezbollah, and the regime.⁶³ Strong evidence exists that Hezbollah and Iranian fighters are trying, somewhat successfully, to establish militia networks and zones of influence in Syria to ensure continued influence in the Levant once Assad falls.⁶⁴ Such actions increase the vulnerability of Lebanon and threaten Israel's national security in the long term.

In conversations with senior members of Lebanon's confessional communities, a concern repeatedly raised was how the fall of the regime in Damascus will impact Hezbollah's behavior in Lebanon. Will Hezbollah, feeling threatened by the changes in Syria, try with Iranian backing to consolidate its position further in the Lebanese state? In a worst-case scenario, will Hezbollah go as far as to try to rupture the political system in Lebanon and bring Lebanon into civil war? These questions remain unanswered, and in conversations with senior diplomats, this fear is top-of-mind when they consider Lebanon after the fall of Assad.

Israel

Israel has its own reasons for concern. The expansion of Hezbollah's weapons stockpiles, transiting from Syria, directly threatens Israel's national security, and explains Tel Aviv's strike at a reported arms exchange between Syria and Hezbollah in January 2013. Israel's

other concern is Syria's chemical and biological weapons arsenal and the emergence of a radical Islamic state across its borders. While Syria was an adversarial state under the Assads, the two states deliberately avoided military confrontations and have recently maintained relatively peaceful borders. The possible emergence of a more radical, sectarian-driven state poses significant challenges to Israel's security, especially as long as issues such as the Golan Heights remain unresolved.

Humanitarian Crisis

“The situation in Syria is nothing short of a catastrophe.” –Pierre Krähenbühl, Director of Operations, International Committee of the Red Cross⁶⁵

With the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs bulletin estimating 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 2.5 million in need of food, 4 million in need of medical attention, and about 70,000 casualties, the situation is dire.⁶⁶ The U.S. and the international community pledged US\$1.5 billion at the end of January 2013, and the U.S. continues to lead the way in contributing to humanitarian relief in Syria. However, this money only partly covers the appeals for January–June 2013, with only US\$200 million donated so far.⁶⁷

At the end of 2012, Lakhdar Brahimi, special envoy to Syria from the United Nations, warned UN member states that the situation is not progressing in a linear fashion: “[The violence] is also escalating. If we have 50,000 killed in almost two years and the war stays another year, we will not have 25,000 more, we will have 100,000 more killed,” he said.⁶⁸ Such a prediction is holding true, as estimates of casualties rose by 10,000 in a matter of about two months. Urban conflict will make matters even worse as al-Nusra grows in strength and opposition forces move into more densely populated areas. If opposition militias make further gains in Damascus and the regime responds as it has in Aleppo or Homs, the death count could easily reach 100,000 in a matter of weeks.

With over one million refugees spanning the Middle East and Africa, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres has declared that “Syria is spiraling toward full-scale disaster.”⁶⁹ Neighboring states have already taken in more than they can provide for, and UN bodies are struggling as their camps exceed maximum capacity.

The escalation in violence and casualties is unsustainable in terms of costs and funding. For everyday Syrians, widespread inflation, which officially rose close to 50 percent at the beginning of 2013,⁷⁰ has made what few goods are available too expensive to buy. The fiscal cost of the crisis is skyrocketing as the conflict escalates. Prevention needs to be prioritized over treatment; doing so will require Western nations to help moderate political and military forces bring an end to the violence and secure a political transition.

Recommendations

First, the U.S., along with the international community, should work with the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (hereby “the Coalition”) to become a transitional government that is inclusive of all communities in Syria and is also representative of former Syrian government officials who share a common vision for a democratic, post-Assad Syria.

The U.S. should urge the Coalition to broaden its numbers to include underrepresented groups, including the Alawites and Christians. Drawing lessons from the dismantlement of the Iraqi Ba’ath party, the Coalition should also take necessary steps to avoid the collapse of the civil service, the security apparatus, and other key institutions. To do so, the Coalition should incorporate former members of the Syrian government into the Coalition who will help identify institutions of the state to preserve in a post-Assad transition.

While maintaining relations with Iraqi President Jalal Talibani, the U.S. should use its relationship with Massoud Barzani and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq as well as its relations within the wider Kurdish community to facilitate the involvement of Kurdish political and military movements in the Coalition and the FSA. These efforts may prove difficult, as the Partiya Yekitiya Demokratik (PYD) has become the most influential Kurdish party in Syria⁷¹ and its leadership distrusts Barzani and his supporters.⁷² Nevertheless, the Coalition should reach out to the PYD as well as Barzani to ensure that Kurdish interests are considered in a transitional government in Syria. In addition, the U.S. should encourage the Free Syrian Army to continue to coordinate with the PYD and other Kurdish troops, and to maintain a long-term military truce in northern Syria.

The U.S. should support public diplomacy initiatives that the Coalition can undertake to better communicate its message of inclusiveness to the Syrian people and the endgame of a viable multi-confessional state. U.S. Foreign Service officers should train Coalition leaders on effective public diplomacy practices and encourage these leaders to devote sufficient time to communicating their message and gaining the trust of the Syrian people. The U.S. should also encourage the Coalition to engage in an information campaign, focusing on “the most powerful medium for transmitting news and opinion in the Arab world”: television.⁷³ The Coalition should utilize this medium to engage in public discourse and garner widespread support from the Syrian people. Messages should particularly target the middle class, as many of these Syrians provide a crucial base of support for Assad.

The U.S. should encourage Coalition efforts to bring the FSA into the Coalition as the Coalition's armed forces. The Coalition should appoint a civilian defense minister to oversee the FSA. Without civilian command and control over the FSA, the Coalition runs the risk of becoming marginalized in the wider opposition movement, and the likelihood increases of a potential security vacuum within the state after the president falls. The Coalition's defense minister should work with the FSA to both unify its ranks and bring nonaffiliated FSA militias into the FSA structure that respect the creation of a stable, democratic, multi-confessional state in Syria.

If the Coalition becomes more representative and inclusive, the U.S. and the greater international community should recognize the Coalition as the transitional legal government of Syria. This recognition serves multiple critical purposes. First, it will help prevent a dangerous political and security vacuum in Syria once President Bashar Assad falls; second, it will help isolate the extremists groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, which are not a party to the Coalition, and marginalize their position in the greater opposition movement; third, it will provide international agencies and NGOs, as well as the Coalition itself, the ability to deliver the needed humanitarian aid already committed by countries such as the U.S. to the Syrian people; and fourth, it will allow the Coalition access to frozen assets abroad.

Second, the U.S. should work with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, and the EU to create a unified international funding source for the Coalition. The administrators of this international fund, preferably a joint EU-GCC initiative, should work closely with the Coalition to ensure adequate allocation of these funds.

At present, despite the broad financial commitments made at the Friends of Syria meetings, the Coalition has yet to receive all committed funds. A new structure will provide an element of accountability from key funders such as Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France, the UK, and the United States. Moreover, a funding source will empower the Coalition to build stronger links with the civilian opposition on the ground and help address the military inequality that is handicapping the opposition forces.

The EU, working with the UN and the U.S. Treasury, should also form a committee of financial regulators to target and sanction funding that goes illegally to groups working to undermine the Coalition—in particular, Jabhat al-Nusra. These bodies should also monitor the use of funds, which should primarily focus on efforts to build local governance, ensure broad representation in the Coalition, and provide humanitarian assistance to those in need in Syria. With the regime struggling to provide economic support for its own people in a rough economic climate, the Coalition can use these funds to fill this need—thus undermining a critical source of the regime's domestic support.

Ideally, all political, humanitarian, and military financial support would eventually be funneled through the Coalition. Due to the absence of the Coalition's formal control over

the FSA, however, the current structure lacks the capacity to effectively allocate military funds. The best alternative, as steps are taken to bring the FSA into the Coalition, is to allocate military funds to the FSA's Supreme Military Council so that it can effectively unify the military opposition under its command. (See Recommendation Four for further details on military support.)

Third, the U.S. should conduct high-level diplomacy to find common interests with Russia to end the violence in Syria and ease the fears of a post-Assad transition.

The U.S. should engage in high-level talks with Russia to find a common diplomatic position from which they could work together to secure an end to the violence in Syria. The U.S. and Russia should jointly sponsor a UN Security Council resolution that reflects both of their concerns and offers a roadmap to secure a stable Syria. This resolution can be based on the Geneva communiqué, which Moscow continues to support.⁷⁴ A complementary approach should be made to China in this respect.

To build trust between Russia and the Coalition, the EU and the U.S. should help broker negotiations between the Coalition and the Russian government. While many promises have been made by members of the Coalition and Russian leadership to engage one another on their respective interests, there have been few signs of developing trust on either end.

These negotiations should focus on contractual agreements between the Syrian Arab Republic and Russia, and other long-term interests of the state. Specifically, the U.S. should encourage the Coalition to address key Russian interests, including the naval base in Tartus, the protection of Russian citizens in Syria, trade agreements, and the inclusion of minorities. (Such an agreement has promise, as members of the opposition have expressed mutual interests with Moscow).⁷⁵

Fourth, in an effort to support moderate opposition efforts to protect Syrian civilians and abate extremists, the U.S. should consider, in coordination with like-minded countries, providing military assistance to vetted leaders of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In addition, the U.S., in conjunction with NATO, should form a joint special operations command in Turkey to monitor the delivery of military assistance and provide logistical and communications support and training to these vetted FSA soldiers.

To encourage the FSA to disassociate itself completely with the al-Nusra front, the U.S., along with the international community, should provide vetted FSA leaders with military equipment. In interviews, members of the FSA expressed that heavier weaponry to defend against armor and aircraft attacks are the single greatest need of the armed opposition. This needed support should help the FSA protect Syrian civilians terrorized by the regime's aerial and ground attacks, offset the appeal of tactical alliances with extremists such as the al-Nusra front, and improve the credibility and the image of the U.S. in the eyes of the Syrian people.

To ensure the effective use of this military assistance, the joint special operations command, working with the FSA's Military Council and regional states, should supervise the distribution of weapons from arms supply centers to vetted militias. This command will disincentivize individual countries from arming commanders in various armed militias separately from this established process, and thus weaken the legitimacy of a larger FSA command structure.

The U.S., NATO, and the GCC should provide international trainers for leadership training and observation purposes. The U.S. should increase its level of intelligence sharing and coordination with the FSA. These efforts are needed to ensure that a new FSA structure can effectively distribute a stable flow of arms to appropriate commanders in areas of operations and assist with the training of FSA units with the use of Russian and Western weaponry. Such efforts will also help improve coordination and discipline in the FSA. These observers can create safeguards to decrease the risk of non-FSA units acquiring this weaponry, train the FSA in the laws of war, and help the FSA enact regulations to punish and prevent unjust killings and reprisals.

This training can take place in adjacent countries to avoid an enlarged military footprint within Syria. In some cases, and more problematic, these states may consider allowing their special forces to operate from within opposition-held areas of Syria in order to effectively train and assist the FSA. If, however, the opposition continues to overtake and hold large areas of Syria, the FSA should consider using liberated areas for training and support.

The U.S., while providing increased logistical support, should take a leading role in assisting the Syrian National Coalition and the FSA in safeguarding its cyber-communications, and preventing Iran and Hezbollah from using more sophisticated cyber-technology to monitor communications of FSA groups in the field. To this end, the U.S. should re-evaluate any sanctions on technological equipment that may help the opposition.

Before agreeing to allocate funds and assistance to the FSA, however, the U.S. should engage in serious negotiations with the FSA leadership regarding internal violations of human rights as well as their ties to al-Nusra and other extremist groups. The U.S. should work toward an agreement in which the FSA denounces human rights violations and introduces procedures to hold those within its own forces accountable for such violations. Such an effort is crucial to earn the deteriorating trust of the Syrian civilian population.⁷⁶ The U.S. should encourage the FSA to cease its battlefield cooperation with terrorist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra. It is in the clear international interest to prevent extremists from hijacking the revolution.

Fifth, the U.S. should reiterate its clear red line regarding the use of chemical and biological weapons, which is prohibited by the Geneva Protocol and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Geneva Protocol, of which Syria is a signatory, established the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons in a theater of war as customary international law. This is especially pertinent since Assad acknowledged Syria to be “in a state of war in every sense of the word.” In sum, the use of chemical weapons against the opposition or neighboring states will necessitate decisive U.S. and international action.⁷⁷

Sixth, a UN-Arab League mandated peacekeeping force may be needed once the Assad regime falls to fill the security vacuum in the state.

Working closely with the transitional government, this peacekeeping force would help disarm groups that cannot be co-opted into a new Syrian army; prevent ethnic cleansing (70 villages, predominantly Alawite, are particularly vulnerable, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Amman); and assist in providing local security to avoid looting and widespread crime. These peacekeeping troops would provide protection to all minorities, including Alawites, Druze, Christian, Ismaili, Armenian, and other communities that may be vulnerable to attacks. This peacekeeping force should also reinforce, where possible, border security.

In accordance with UN Resolution 2086 (2013), the peacekeeping mission should also strive to assist the transitional government in peace-building measures.⁷⁸ In particular, the troops should assist with the following measures outlined in the resolution:

- Strengthen rule of law institutions
- Assist national security frameworks
- Guide justice reform
- Work with UN agencies to help refugees, internally displaced persons, women and children, and others in need
- Promote gender equality and the empowerment of women

Preparatory efforts should be made to construct this force in advance, as sectarian violence is becoming an endemic feature of this conflict.

Seventh, the U.S. should lead the efforts of the EU, the Arab League, NATO, and the GCC to buttress neighboring states in the Levant, in particular Jordan and Lebanon, that are vulnerable to political and economic turmoil as a result of the deepening civil war in Syria.

Members of the international community should take necessary steps to stymie efforts of potentially dangerous groups to exploit the security vacuum in Syria and launch attacks against these neighboring states. To do this, the U.S. and other states need to assist these countries in monitoring the flow of arms and personnel into and from neighboring countries.

A joint NATO-Arab League effort should be undertaken immediately to buttress the Jordanian, Iraqi, and Lebanese militaries as they deal with efforts to secure their borders and contain the violence from spilling into their territory. The U.S. military should

continue to work with these militaries in monitoring and preventing the flow of chemical and biological weapons into their territory.

The U.S. should convene a Friends of Jordan conference that can provide a substantial international aid package to the Jordanian government to address the rising public debt associated with the massive influx of displaced persons into Jordan. This aid package should be based on the recommendations made both in the UN Regional Response Plan for January 2013–June 2013 (for which funds have been pledged but not received) and the Joint Jordan–UN Appeal from October 2012. Considerations should also be made in light of the exponential increase in refugee flows over the past three months.

The U.S. should also prepare for the potential political crisis that may engulf Lebanon if the Assad regime falls or if the fighting continues. The U.S., EU, and GCC countries should monitor the sectarian strife throughout the country, especially in Tripoli, and lend the Lebanese government political and mediation support to prevent a breakdown of the fragile political system in Lebanon. Moreover, a larger question on the future role of Hezbollah in Lebanon must be considered as a potential security vulnerability to the state and the region. In particular, the U.S. should continue to work with Israel to monitor potential weapons exchanges between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah (see Recommendation Eight). The GCC and the Arab League should also consider increased financial aid to help the Lebanese government address its deficit issues and slowed growth in GDP.

Finally, the U.S. should tie continuing aid to the Iraqi government to the condition that it ceases support of the Assad regime and prevents the use of Iraqi territory and airspace for the transport of fighters and weapons into Syria. Baghdad should also work to ensure that infiltration of Al Qaeda in Iraq is prevented and halted.

Eighth, the U.S. should continue to support efforts by the UN, the EU, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to address the deepening humanitarian crisis that is resulting from the outflow of refugees to Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as those individuals caught in the theater of war.

The U.S. should continue to lead global efforts to provide humanitarian aid for Syria and these regional states. Consideration should be given to supplying humanitarian aid directly to the Coalition and allowing Syrian representatives an opportunity to funnel funding to those in need. As the U.S. continues to lead global humanitarian efforts, it should continue to publicize such efforts more broadly domestically, in Syria, and in the Greater Middle East region.

More specifically, the U.S. should provide support to villages in the south of Syria, as a number of refugees are from these areas. In addition to direct humanitarian funding, the U.S. should support the UN's efforts in humanitarian assistance planning by providing more up-to-date satellite imagery of Syrian cities and villages.

The U.S. and the GCC should increase their support to the vulnerable 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, half of whom are directly affected by the conflict.⁷⁹ The U.S. should also continue to support UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) efforts to provide for refugees in the war-torn country, and consider allocating relief aid directly to the agency to meet some of the needs outlined in the UNRWA's Syria Crisis Response.⁸⁰

Ninth, the U.S. should consult closely with Israel on the evolving security situation on the Israeli-Syrian border.

As the situation evolves in Syria, the U.S. and Israel need to consult closely on monitoring the security situation on the border and also the movements of arms shipments from Syria to Hezbollah. However, in an effort to prevent an international crisis, the U.S. should advise Israel to tread carefully regarding resort to direct strikes on Syrian territory and targets. Such actions should be taken with great caution to avoid alienating other regional states with which we are cooperating, and public opinion. The U.S. should also encourage the Israeli government to halt the development of a permanent security fence on the border in the Golan Heights area, which could hinder potential openings for the resumption of peace negotiations in a post-Assad era.

Tenth, the U.S. should propose to the UN that individuals associated with the atrocities committed either on the side of the regime or the opposition should be investigated and referred to the International Criminal Court.

In a February 5, 2013, UN Inquiry report, the commission wrote that “the ICC is the appropriate institution for the fight against impunity in Syria. As an established, broadly supported structure, it could immediately initiate investigations against authors of serious crimes in Syria and due to the complementarity principle, the option of national prosecutions at a later stage, instead of or in parallel to the activities of the ICC, remains fully available.”⁸¹ As the commission explains, the only possible way such reference will be made is through a Security Council vote. The U.S. should work with Russia and China to secure this referral.

A UN-led process to create a legal framework for defection, accountability, and justice will help create an atmosphere in which individuals associated with the regime can voluntarily, with legal protections, leave the regime, while holding accountable those who have committed crimes in Syria. The UN should work to ensure there is both accountability and protection in this era of extreme violence in Syria, and discourage the temptation to prosecute groups instead of individuals. The UN, working with the Arab League and Turkey, should create a process that provides legal safeguards to those in the armed forces who are not implicated in war crimes, and who wish to defect and resettle in a neighboring state or abroad.

The UN should immediately identify and publicly sanction those assisting the role of Iranian Republican Guard Corps units (including the Quds Force) and Hezbollah fighters

in Syria. The U.S. should also increase pressure on Moscow to stop providing air support to the Syrian military.

Lastly, the U.S., along with the international community, should help the Coalition prepare for a post-Assad state.

The U.S. should work with the UN to provide guiding principles to the Coalition as it creates post-Assad institutions and governance structures to potentially fill the state vacuum once Assad falls. Planning for these structures and the transition should begin before the fall of the Assad regime to prevent political uncertainty and a security void.

The U.S. should also encourage the transitional government to focus first on a constitutional design and later on democratic elections. The cases of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt suggest that this order gives greater legitimacy to a future government. The Coalition should recognize the importance of respecting the traditional multi-confessional and multi-ethnic nature of Syria. In this respect, the U.S. should help ensure that protections for minorities and power sharing are codified in any future constitution.

In addition, the U.S. should support efforts of the Coalition to establish provincial governments in those areas liberated by the FSA. The Coalition should continue efforts to elect a prime minister to oversee the management of liberated areas in Syria and appoint various civil servants to provide humanitarian and political support to these currently insecure areas, while also preparing these areas for transition to a post-Assad state. The U.S. should encourage and financially support NGOs and technical advisers to work with newly appointed or re-appointed Syrian civil servants on local governance and institutional construction. In particular, these technical advisers and NGOs should help manage the distribution of aid, as well as the establishment of public works projects and an organized bureaucratic structure.

Finally, the U.S. should take a leading role, along with other key countries, in mobilizing on a multilateral basis a series of economic development initiatives to foster investment and development in a post-Assad Syria. The Coalition should also reach out to the business community diaspora and encourage re-investment in the country. The Coalition should encourage entrepreneurship and innovation among the Syrian people, and provide government assistance to those seeking to re-establish or start new businesses.

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