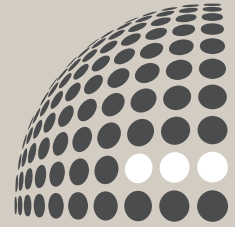


# SETA Policy Debate



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## Syria: What's Next?



| steven heydemann | randa slim | aram nerguizian | erol cebeci |



## ABSTRACT

The twin vetoes by Russia and China on the UNSC draft resolution on Syria, described as having “no tooth,” have analysts pondering what the next stage of the conflict might be. As Russia weighs in on the Assad government’s crackdown on the opposition, hopes for a swift resolution of the stalemate seem to fade. The Assad regime’s most recent attack on Homs resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties suggests that we might be headed for a civil war scenario. Though the US and Turkey have taken clear positions on the Assad regime, it remains uncertain what kind of tools they may be able to employ to help the Syrian opposition succeed. Syria is quickly turning into a sectarian battleground between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well. As so many outside powers have clashing geopolitical, security, and economic interests, what does the road ahead look like for Syria?

This Policy Debate is based on a panel discussion on “Syria: What’s Next?” organized by the SETA Foundation at Washington D.C. on February 15, 2011. The panelists included Steven Heydemann of the United States Institute of Peace, Randa Slim of New America Foundation and Middle East Institute, Aram Nerguizian of Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Erol Cebeci of SETA D.C. The discussion was moderated by Kadir Ustun of SETA D.C.



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*Policy Debate Series Editors:* Kadir Üstün and Kılıç Buğra Kanat

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## SYRIA: WHAT'S NEXT?

### *Kadir Ustun*

Thank you for joining us for this panel on Syria today. My name is Kadir Ustun, I am the Research Director here at the SETA Foundation at Washington, D.C. We have a very distinguished group of experts to talk on Syria. We have Steven Heydemann from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). He serves as the Senior Advisor for Middle East Initiatives at USIP and is a political scientist specializing in the comparative politics and political economy of the Middle East with a particular focus on Syria. He is the author of many books on authoritarianism in the Middle East as well and he will be talking about the US position on Syria. We have Randa Slim, who is an adjunct research fellow at the New America Foundation and a scholar at the Middle East Institute. She is the author of several studies, book chapters, and articles on conflict management, post-conflict peace building, and Middle East politics. She is currently completing a book on Hezbollah as well. She will be talking to us about the Syrian opposition. Aram Nerguizian is a visiting fellow in the Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He conducts research on the Middle East and North Africa and specializes in security, politics, and military development in the Middle East. He focuses on the Lebanese military, US and Iranian strategic competition in the Levant and civil-military relations in the region. He has a very good report on possible military intervention in Syria as well. He will be talking to us about military intervention scenarios. We also have our Executive Director at SETA-DC, Erol Cebeci, who will be talking about Turkey's Syria policy. Prior to joining SETA-DC, Mr. Cebeci served two terms as a member of the Turkish Parliament, he worked on NATO and Council of Europe issues, as well as on human rights, security, and defense issues.

We put together this panel over a month ago with the idea that we would see the result of the UN vote by now and we would have a clearer idea about the possible international response to the Syrian situation. As you all know, the resolution was vetoed by Russia and China. The international effort now seems to focus on building a group



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of countries called the 'Friends of Syria,' which will meet in Tunisia on February 24th. What will they be discussing exactly? The idea of humanitarian aid into Syria and other proposals they will be discussing are not entirely clear but this meeting will take place. Given the complexity of diverging interests among major regional as well as global powers and players, it is not entirely clear what can be achieved in this meeting and afterwards. The grim scenarios about Syria have been discussed widely, with civil war looming in the background while the Syrian government's crackdown on the opposition continues and talk of outside intervention in one form or another continues as well. So without further ado, I'd like to turn the floor over to Professor Heydemann, who will be talking to us about the US policy toward Syria.

***Steven Heydemann***

I was asked, as our moderator mentioned, to talk about US policy in relation to Syria, where we are now and where we might be headed. It seems to me that the only reasonable starting point for framing a discussion about US policy in relation to Syria is to acknowledge that we are really in a very difficult position. We really are at a very tough moment with respect to US policy. I think that the US, along with all of the other governments that support a political transition in Syria find themselves today in an exceptionally difficult position, struggling to find a pathway ahead but with no clear way forward to determine what it is that they might want to do next. What I want to try and do today is to make the case that there are three main reasons that explain the dilemma that the administration finds itself in today.

First, we have to recognize that the administration is more or less bumped up against the limits of their efforts to use political and economic pressure to bring about regime change in Damascus. Based on the developments of the past two weeks and in particular the Russian and Chinese vetoes of the UN Security Council resolution about ten days ago on Saturday, the US now finds itself confronting what I think has to be seen as in some respects the very decisive failure of the strategy and of the underlying logic that guided that strategy in its approach to Syria over the past year. That is a strategy that I would define as reliance on traditional tools of statecraft, in particular economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure, as a way to raise the costs of loyalty to the Assad regime beyond the breaking point, to peel away critical communities from the regime like minorities and the business community, to cause sufficient strains and rifts within the ruling coalition, and to cause factions and breaks among the ruling coalition that we hoped would include senior military officers, senior figures from the intelligence apparatus. The result of this strategy and the underlying logic would be to back the Assad regime into a corner in which it would be compelled either to enter a process of negotiated transition or, because of the extent to which its power had been eroded by this logic of peeling away its supporters, it might even be vulnerable to some kind of overthrow from within. However, here we are, almost a year into the implementation of a policy anchored in this logic and in the tools that go hand-in-hand with this logic,

and we have almost no evidence to suggest that the strategy is working. We certainly know that the authority of the regime is fraying, we certainly understand that there are some serious internal differences, internal cleavages within the regime, we've seen some high-level defections from the regime, but the kinds of cleavages that we were hoping might lead core regime supporters and minorities to defect have simply not taken place yet over the course of the past year. We have to recognize that is something of a significant failure of American policy.

Moreover, and this is the second reason why I think the administration finds itself today struggling with how to move forward on Syria, the administration together with its partners in dealing with Syria also seem to feel that despite the relatively few indicators of success that we have seen from the current policy to date that there are no real viable alternatives to that policy. It is true that the veto of the UN resolution together with the escalation of violence on the ground as we have seen now thirteen days of intense attacks on Homs, brutal attacks on Zabadani and other places, this has breathed new life into arguments about military intervention and I would expect that debates about the merits of intervention will continue and maybe even intensify as long as it seems that the political track is blocked, as long as the escalation of violence on the ground continues. I would argue, however, that these debates are very unlikely to change the underlying strategic calculus or strategic logic that has guided the administration's policy over the first year. I think the administration recognizes that none of the governments that would be responsible for taking a lead in any kind of intervention are willing to do so, the Arab League has explicitly ruled out intervention in its foreign minister's communiqué of last Sunday, there is no international coalition in support of intervention, there is no international legitimacy for an intervention through the UN, and so I think the administration recognizes that despite the growing volume of the debate about introducing intervention as an additional arrow in its policy quiver, intervention is in many respects very much off the table. But there's a bit of a caveat to this because in setting aside intervention as a viable option for the administration to consider, and in continuing to argue that political and economic pressures are eventually going to force the regime to yield, it finds itself in the somewhat unenviable position of having to argue that the best choice for US strategy and maybe the only choice for US strategy is to continue with the same policy that has failed to make appreciable gains over the past year. There's a sense in which we find ourselves in the position of this firm that loses money on every sale but hopes that it can make it up in volume. This is not a winning strategy; this is not where you want to be in trying to defend your policy choices.

To be fair, however, I think the administration understands that diplomatic pressures and tools like sanctions are slow-moving instruments. These are not options that anyone expected would produce results overnight. The expectation always was that the pressures caused by these instruments would build incrementally and that, as pressures build, that logic of peeling away and causing internal cleavages would actually begin to take hold. The problem is that in trying to make the case that this is the strategy that we should keep relying on, that we have to bump up against the reality that

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conditions on the ground are not waiting for the strategy of the US to have the effects that its advocates hope it has. It is not clear that additional political pressure will change the strategic calculus of the Assad regime, there are significant uncertainties about how long the opposition will be able to sustain the protest movement given the levels of repression it has been subject to over the past several months, and if we find ourselves in a position in which the rate at which the regime applies repression outpaces the rate at which our policies have an impact, then we really are in that losing situation. We are in that situation in which we are trying to make the case that further patience will pay off but the consequences of delay could undermine the conditions that justify the policy in the first place.

This gets us to the third reason, the final reason why the administration is struggling so deeply on Syria right now and it is that in focusing so much of its attention on the political track and so much determination to resist calls for military intervention, and I have to say I'm not an advocate of intervention myself, but in taking this approach the administration has left itself fundamentally unprepared to deal with the most significant trend shaping the Syrian uprising over the past six months and that has been the militarization of the uprising and the emergence of armed resistance groups of largely unorganized, uncoordinated, small numbers of people who band together with their guns to participate in armed attacks against the regime. These are nominally grouped under the rubric of the Free Syrian Army in effect, however, they operate under very little command and control. Now for the most part, the US has responded to this trend by reminding us of the dangers of militarization, and by pointing out that the US continues to believe that peaceful protests are the most viable strategy for achieving political change in Syria. As militarization deepens, as militarization expands, for obvious reasons given what we have seen happening on the ground in Syria, I think the costs of not having some kind of strategy for effectively managing militarization, for effectively building a political approach that includes deeper multilateral engagement with the political opposition as the Arab League called for last Sunday, around a coordinated program to manage and train and perhaps even equip the armed resistance and to build its operational capacity and its command and control structures, but to do so in a way that ensures that they are operating under the authority of a civilian opposition and doing so in a way that seems to offer at least some possibilities for managing flows of weapons into Syria, I think the costs of not having this option as a piece of our strategic portfolio become increasingly clear. I will close by saying that if we recognize that the aim of US policy is not simply regime transition, but to create the conditions that will be more conducive to the emergence of a stable, and we would like to hope, potentially democratic Syria then it seems to me that expanding our repertoire of options so that we directly address the kinds of challenges to Syria's future that would result from the proliferation of uncoordinated, uncontrolled armed opposition groups serving as proxies for regional actors whose interests may diverge significantly from ours, that we are really doing a disservice both to our own long-term interests and to our immediate policy aims in Syria.

### Randa Slim

My task today is to talk about the Syrian opposition and what should be done to bring together a united voice for the Syrian opposition. I am going to build on what Steven has said which I wholeheartedly agree with regarding the need to manage the ongoing militarization which we have begun to witness in Syria. I am going to do something that is very politically inappropriate and quote from a piece that I wrote for Foreign Policy about last November. In that piece I said the following:

*"Seven months into the uprising the Syrian opposition has failed to develop a united voice and platform. Unless these disparate groups unite and present a viable alternative to the Assad regime, both Syria's fearful majority and the international community will find it difficult to effectively push for meaningful change in Damascus."*

Four months later, this statement partially holds true. The Syrian opposition has yet to develop a united voice and a united leadership. Assad still enjoys a wide base of support partly because Syrians feel there is no credible alternative to Assad. Last Sunday, the Arab league called on the Syrian opposition to unify its ranks. One senior Arab diplomat explained why the Arab League, to date, has yet to recognize the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by saying "The main problem of the Syrian opposition is that it is still scattered. They don't have a united leadership or a single voice."

With this prospect of arming the opposition going forward, especially if the Arab league were to decide to provide what it calls "all kinds of political and material support," very loose terminology that can open the door for all kinds of support, including military, arming a fragmented opposition which includes several rebel factions which lack a central command will push Syria into a sectarian civil war with severe consequences for regional stability, especially for neighboring countries Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. The Syrian National Council (SNC) has tried pulling together the various political factions in the opposition under its umbrella. To date, it has failed at this task. It has also failed in bringing the growing Free Syrian Army (FSA) under its command. It has failed in its outreach efforts to minority groups namely Alawites, Christians and Kurds. We can spend a whole hour explaining why, in my opinion, the SNC has failed at these tasks which are essential to positioning it as the political leader of the revolution akin to what happened in Libya with the National Transitional Council.

There are different fault lines inside the SNC, divisions between Islamists, nationalists, liberals, traditional opposition versus expats, old opposition versus young opposition, different groups fighting against each other for leadership roles. There was an attempt to draft an agreement between the two poles of the political opposition, the SNC and the NCBDC. Eventually, the senior leadership of the SNC was forced to walk away from the deal by young activists. Groups inside the SNC mistrust each other and have yet to learn how to work with each other. As one member of the SNC general secretariat told me very recently, "we need time to get to know each other," and time is not something

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that is available right now. Inside the SNC, the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, represent the most organized group with the longest track record of political activism. They are mistrusted by the liberal/secular wings of the SNC. They are mistrusted by the Kurds because of their close association with the Turks. They are mistrusted by the Christians because the latter fear that an Islamist-dominated Syria will not be as friendly to its Christians as is the case in Egypt and as has been the case in Iraq. They are mistrusted by Sunni urban elites, many of whom are secular, who are afraid that an Islamist regime will usher in an era of social conservatism that will destroy the style of life to which they have grown accustomed. The business community inside Syria, looks at the state of disarray inside the SNC and are worried about instability and chaos post-Assad. They do not see in the SNC a credible alternative to Assad. At their last meeting in Tunis, the SNC established an infrastructure consisting of various bureaus dealing with different activity streams from the media bureau to international affairs, to humanitarian assistance, to outreach to minorities, to military affairs, economic affairs. To date most of these bureaus remain paper entities. Some of the obstacles lie in lack of funds, some is logistical, when the members of the committee reside in different countries and cannot meet face-to-face, and some of it, to be very honest, is poor teamwork skills.

But a more serious weakness, in my opinion, is that the SNC leadership and membership remain a foreign entity to a majority of the Syrian population inside Syria. Whenever I meet Syrian businessmen, especially in Lebanon, even people who are sympathetic to the protest movement, when I ask them about the SNC, their first reply is: Who are these people? There is this perception of an expat-dominated SNC, a foreign group that lacks authenticity. The word that is often used to refer to the SNC is "political opportunists." The NCC does not fare better in popular perceptions. It has been discredited in the eyes of the youth activists, who, in my opinion, remain the true heroes of this revolution. They have refused to embrace what the Syrians on the street have been calling for some time now: foreign military intervention, a no-fly zone, establishment of buffer zones and humanitarian corridors. Though the NCC has a longer track record in standing up and opposing the Assad regime than the SNC leadership, the youth activists view them as people who have tried regime change in the past and failed.

Now, the Free Syrian Army, which recently has emerged as the latest focal point of the activists' hope for a leadership of the opposition movement, remains, as Steven pointed out, more a collection of small disparate groups than an army. There is no command and control structure; it has limited and irregular access to military supply lines essential for operating on a larger scale. The FSA's Achilles heel is its sectarian character. Nearly all the defectors are Sunni. We do not know what the exact number is; the numbers range from 10,000 to 40,000 to 50,000. We do not know what type of coordination exists, if any, between the units who are responsible for which attack. They have different ways of getting their weapons, some buy them on the black market or they buy them from corrupt officers or sympathetic officers that are still in the service.

There was, at some time, a much trumpeted coordination between the FSA and the SNC. In my opinion, based on conversations with both parties, this relationship re-



mains on paper. The FSA has recently established its own military council whose purpose is to establish direct contact with foreign governments to get money and weapons. The FSA has also suffered from the same kind internal divisions that affect the SNC. Recently, as many of you have read, General Mustapha Sheikh, another defecting officer who has formed a new organization—the “Higher Military Council”—claims to lead armed defectors inside Syria. Again, building on what Steven said, there are reports of independent armed brigades, which are neither beholden to the FSA nor to the SNC.

Now, when it comes to minority groups, the SNC has failed to reach out to them and to think and enact a strategy of reaching out to these groups. For Alawites, this has now become an existential fight. There are a few voices within the Alawite community trying to dissociate the community from the Assad regime’s brutal crackdown. Still, in its majority, I think the Assad regime has succeeded in convincing them that their future is wedded to Assad’s political survival. We are hearing more and more anecdotal evidence of the community being angry at Bashar for not being brutal enough in crushing the uprising, akin to what his father did. The more militarized the Sunni-majority opposition becomes, the less willing the Alawites will be to give up the fight. The fact that the SNC executive council does not count one senior Alawite figure among its members, the fact that not one senior Alawite military or security officer has defected has not been reassuring for the majority of Alawites. Only Alawites can be assured by co-religionists that a post-Assad regime will not bring on them the retributions they fear.

The views of Kurds in this equation towards the Syrian government remain quite complicated, with many distrusting the opposition as much as Assad. Syria’s Kurds are deeply fragmented politically. There are Kurdish political parties, some of which are taking part in the SNC and the NCC. There are now Kurdish leaders both in Iraq and Turkey meddling in the affairs of Syrian Kurds, creating their own proxies or affiliates among Syria’s Kurds. There was an attempt at uniting the Syrian Kurdish groups made last October resulting in the establishment of the Syrian Kurdish Council (KNC). The Kurds, talking to their leadership, say that they have a number of misgivings about the SNC, from not being allocated enough seats in the SNC general secretariat that is commensurate with the Kurds’ political weight, to general concerns about the SNC seeming dependent on their host nation, Turkey, to deep mistrust in the Muslim Brotherhood, which is ideologically opposed to the Kurdish demand of federalism.

So, with this state of affairs, as the international community, including Turkey, prepares for the launch of the Friends of Syria group, the first order of business for this group is to unite the Syrian opposition groups under one large umbrella in order to prevent the kind of accusation that will surely accelerate once the weapons start coming into Syria and reaching the hands of the disparate rebel factions. Before we rush toward arming the opposition, we need to unite the opposition. To date, the international community, including the Arab League, has so far left it up to the Syrian opposition groups to get their act together and work out a unified platform on their own. Eleven months into the uprisings they have failed at doing that. In my opinion, the SNC has lost the legitimacy necessary to carry out the unifier role. It is time to move beyond the SNC, and work to-

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ward forming a larger opposition council, a network of networks which would include the SNC, and, among others, the FSA, the NCC, the grass-roots activists, civil society groups, leading dissidents in the Alawite community, Kurdish political parties that have embraced regime change, businessmen, and leaders in the Christian community. The Friends of Syria group provides the platform for launching such an effort. This effort at uniting the opposition should not be Western-led for all the reasons we are aware of. It should be Arab-led with assistance from Turkey, given the leverage Turkey has with a number of players inside the Syrian opposition, the Islamists and the FSA.

What I am proposing here is that if we borrow the formula of A3+1 group could play the mediating role, with the three Arab countries being Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Tunisia, assisted by Turkey. The Arab League has recently announced that it will appoint a special envoy to Syria; supposedly the name that is being proposed now is Abdulilah, who today was quoted as saying he is not interested in this appointment because the security situation in Syria is not clear. But the Arab League special envoy to Syria, once they can agree on a name, would be the official primarily responsible for doing the legwork of reaching out to the different opposition groups, identifying the different leadership nodes in the political and the military opposition That could be followed by a Taif kind of process, borrowing from the agreement that lead to the end of the Lebanese Civil War, when the A3+1 will bring these different groups together under one big umbrella to negotiate the organizational infrastructure of this new council, to try to bring civilian control over the armed factions and over the FSA. As for the incentives, why would the groups in the Syrian opposition agree to this? The assistance agreed to by the Arab League that it has said it is basically willing to give to the opposition. By conditioning this assistance on having this council put together, I think we have now this small window of opportunity where we can make this happen and unite what has so far proven to be a fragmented opposition.

#### ***Aram Nerguizian***

I often get called a pessimist but I consider myself an optimist who understands the weight of guns and bullets. There has been a lot of talk over the last few months about the prospects for any kind of military intervention in Syria. This has ranged from discussions of so-called humanitarian corridors, creating zones for mobility, and relief for the opposition and every Syrian, all the way to direct intervention not unlike that seen in Libya. As Mr. Ustun mentioned, I have a report on military intervention, and those of you who know it will clearly see the tone of that reporting here in the sense that there are real costs to examining prospects for military intervention. We also need to remember that when we talk about things like 'humanitarian corridors' that this is misinformed language which hides the reality that entails suppression of Syrian air defenses, potential fatalities in the thousands, and military operations that would eclipse anything like the Libya operation in terms of scale, scope, and cost in a time of deep austerity.

Before we discuss wildcards, it is critical to look at what the factors are in terms of Syria's military and its defensive capability. First and foremost, a year of unrest has not changed the reality that Syria has one of the most sophisticated regional air defense networks. It is aging by Western standards and there are countermeasures to some of the more advanced systems. Long-range weapons like the SA-2, 3 and 5 which are in bundled static positions across the country in key areas are more geared toward managing a threat from Israel than a threat from foreign intervention either by sea or by land. That being said, they do present a credible risk, they complicate any planning on any kind of effort that has to do with intervention, and they are still a real risk to regional militaries and regional air forces. These forces include Arab and non-Arab militaries like Turkey, which are sophisticated but don't have the experience in managing and competing with an air defense network and have engaged in very limited combat operations. There are real risks for these militaries in comparison with battle-tested units of the US and NATO states.

Syria also has more sophisticated air capability in 2011/2012 than it did in 2007/2008 in large part thanks to the delivery of more sophisticated short-range anti-air systems. Again, any kind of intervention in Syria is unlikely to have any effect and it is inconceivable without some kind of structure that focuses on eliminating air defense structures. Systems like the Pantsir-S1 which are mobile, advanced, and cutting-edge by our 21st century standards present a real risk to helicopter incursion and to low-level flying aircraft, and despite the instability the Syrians have maintained a level of readiness that is difficult to qualify. You can't ascribe a lot of the analysis on dwindling morale on the level of readiness of Syrian air defenses. There are continued reports of Russian advisory roles in terms of supporting the structure, so this risk remains viable. This also transits over to the air force. Yes, Syria has an aging air force with the obsolescent and modern equipment geared toward managing threats from Israel but there is real capability there from a regional standpoint and these aircraft can also be armed with some of Syria's chemical and biological systems, which complicate the risks further with the proliferation threat.

A lot of these facilities like air defense structures and air bases are located close to urban centers. In some cases proximity is a real issue and there are risks of heightened mortality rates among civilians that even advanced targeting cannot offset. This is a real risk from a perception of warfare standpoint if intervention should for whatever reason become an option—and I'm not saying that it is, my view is that we are very far from any real discussion of intervention—but it's important to highlight these risks. Syria also has very large surface-to-surface missile holdings ranging from short-range to medium-range tactical systems, that can be armed with chemical and biological warfare (BCW) systems that also include unitary systems and some dispersion as well. They aren't battle-tested but they are a proliferation risk. Libya is fortunate and also a test case—fortunate in that there's been a cycle of demobilizing CW systems in the Libyan arsenal over a multi-year period so in a sense the instability in 2011 did not create a real proliferation risk. That is not the case in Syria, we do have a mature, multi-decade

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old program in dealing with VX gas, sarin and other weaponizable systems and there have been tests of scud missiles conducted as far back as 2001 by the Syrians on their delivery systems. So both in regards to surface-to-surface missiles and BCW capability there are real proliferation risks should intervention occur, should we have greater instability, should there be real divisions within the Syrian military which we don't see so far; all of these aggravate the scenarios.

Beyond ground systems you have a viable anti-ship threat. Any intervention against Syria, whatever the objective or scope, will have a naval dimension to it. All the systems in Syrian holdings are largely static, they're located in Baniyas, Latakia, Tartus and other port facilities. They don't have real capability and there are countermeasures. That being said, recent reports of deliveries of sophisticated supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles, like the SS N-26 Yakhont from the Russians (systems that have targeting ranges as far out as the western edge of Cyprus that can cruise undetected or silent and only actively ping in the last or terminal phases of attack with something in the range of 25-45 seconds of warning to surface ships) will present a real and viable threat to US and friendly surface vessels and could potentially be a carrier-killer in this kind of a scenario. The fact that you have these systems potentially in batteries, known as the bastion system, along with the coastal perimeter, creates a real risk for any group of countries or any individual country that would like to utilize naval support, naval suppression, or air power on naval vessels in an intervention scenario.

Now I come to the last part of my presentation, to focus on the wildcards, factors that would complicate intervention or complicate thinking about intervention that don't have much to do with direct military capability. The first is that Syria is arguably not Libya, that they have enormous military capability. There's a lot of reporting about defections and desertions but behind the reality is that the bulk of the Syrian military has not been brought to bear, behind the reality is that this force has arguably been far more resilient in the face of opposition pressure and international pressure. You have a country 3-4 times the population size of Libya, thirty times the population density per square kilometer, and this complicates intervention from a death-toll standpoint in the context of suppression of enemy air defense operations (SEAD), let alone land operations or special operations. You have far more complex tribal and sectarian dynamics at work—Syria is in many regards a divided country that has been hiding behind the veneer of pan-Arab nationalism, and that veneer has largely been lifted. In this type of scenario it does complicate the dynamics because any intervention would be perceived by local forces and local political actors as a Western-led effort to support a Sunni majority against the minority Alawites and other smaller communities. The legacy here unfortunately, as much as we'd like to broaden the opposition base, is largely rooted in the realities of Iraq and Lebanon before the civil war where minority authoritarian leadership or minorities with a concentration of political power have suffered the consequences of mismanaging transitions or mismanaging their majority populations and then suffered the consequences. I doubt any post-Assad political structure can be sufficiently benevolent in its outlook to rule out any kinds of reprisals,

unless it includes minority groups. So this is a key wildcard if one is to really consider any kind of post-Assad structure or intervention. You also have an opposition that is still far too divided and that level of division constitutes a viable wildcard, which makes the prospects for managing CW systems, armored holdings, these large SSM holdings in terms of ballistic missiles and tactical systems, and other potential proliferation risks that much more grave from a military standpoint.

You also have a Syrian military that is still far more resilient than we give it credit. The cycle of over-recruiting from within the Alawite community as far back as the 1950s is bearing fruit. This means that there is little compunction among elite units about suppressing the Sunni majority and suppressing cities like Homs and Hama. You will continue to see limited defections among these ranks and you also have to factor in the reality that both within the Syrian military and within the Syrian Ba'ath party you do have Sunnis who have very few prospects in a post-Assad structure, either in the opposition or in other structures, and this does complicate the dynamics. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other insurgent groups battling against the Assad regime and its crackdown also have their challenges. It's very difficult to think about how to move forward either in the context of direct intervention or asymmetric support through capacity-building or providing the kinds of advisory capacity to the FSA without imagining a scenario where the US or any providing state ends up locked in what is essentially a proxy battle within Syria. My view is that we are already well beyond discussions of a potential proxy competition in Syria. The Gulf states are another wildcard which tie into that. Any discussion of intervention in Syria has to deal with the reality that while local opposition forces and insurgent groups, as well as local groups defending neighborhoods, try to operate to address local security concerns. All of this is being buffered by a level of competition with Iran over regional hegemony, over the structure of post-Assad or post-Syria instability of order in the Levant, over Iranian support to Hezbollah, or over Iranian support to Hamas. All of these dynamics are playing out in Syria. Whereas Iraq once was the theater for competition, now we also have Syria. So this does create destabilizing factors which complicate the prospects for intervention.

Military intervention would destabilize neighboring states such as Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and they're all real risks for Turkey as well. Lebanon would probably suffer the most. We're not even in a scenario where we're having intervention take place in any real fashion today, and you already have a cycle of violence that starts and stops in the north of the country between Alawite and Sunni factions in Tripoli. This is a symptom of the kinds of problems Lebanon will face as events progress. The fact that competing political forces in Lebanon are jockeying on either side beguiles the fact that minor players in Lebanon cannot...well, the Lebanese tail cannot wag the Syrian dog essentially. There is no way for Lebanon to escape instability and being caught in a tsunami of instability in the wake of any kind of direct intervention. Jordan is also experiencing unrest, which complicates this and it is a key regional ally. Taking together the prospects for intervention are premature. I will conclude by saying that the dynamics are such that the West and the US understand the realities of what proxy warfare in Syria

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**Erol Cebeci:**  
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advised the Assad  
regime to initiate  
the reform process  
and come up with  
a plan.

would mean— it would be a another Iraq, it would be a Lebanon on a far larger scale in terms of the future of instability in the region, and it could further exacerbate sectarian divisions.

### ***Erol Cebeci***

I was given the task of presenting the Turkish perspective in terms of its future role in the Syrian crisis. First of all, Syria was a different case for Turkish political leadership. As some of you know, Turkish political leadership cultivated very strong political and economic relations with Syria over the last decade. This was Turkey's largest foreign policy investment, and for nine months—since the start of the Arab Spring and before events had started in Syria—Turkey strongly advised the Assad regime to initiate the reform process and come up with a plan. That process went on until August, during which President Assad made promises several times and created multiple timelines of what to do next. The plans were never realized, and when the Assad regime used extreme and brutal force on the demonstrations, Turkey chose to side with the Syrian people over the regime. In August 2011, the call came that President Assad should go. When Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu was here last week, he said that Turkey had put so much time and effort into making Assad a Gorbachev, but unfortunately he has chosen to be a Milosevic.

Obviously, Turkey had significant economic and security interests in Syria and in the neighborhood. On the economic side, Turkey's trade with the Middle East was facilitated through Syria and Turkish bilateral trade with Syria was at its peak in 2010/2011 at \$2.5 billion, but the routes Syria provided for Turkish trade to the Middle East was much more important than the numbers alone. Almost all of Turkey's economic interests are gone since the events of the last six months. On the security side, Syria also represented something crucial for Turkey because Syria had served as a safe haven for the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s and this changed in the early 2000s. Since the beginning of the crisis, Turkey has warned Syria that playing the Kurdish card could trigger unilateral action by Turkey and so far the indications are that Assad is not using the PKK card. Turkey was engaged with Syria for multiple reasons that include regional diplomacy but once this engagement policy failed Turkey applied its own economic sanctions. Turkey has done this in parallel with the Arab League but this is a separate set of sanctions than those of the Arab League. Turkey is not part of the Arab League but it has a collaboration agreement with the Arab League. Turkey has applied economic sanctions, frozen the assets of the Syrian regime, isolated its important people and fully supported the Arab League proposals, the first observer mission and the UN proposals.

Following Russia and China vetoing the Arab League proposal at the UN, it seems now that there is a new plan on the table as it was announced after last Sunday's meeting of the Arab League. The current plan has a two-track approach. The first track includes Turkey, the US, the Arab League and some European countries who will help with an

international coalition—the Friends of Syria—to maintain and increase economic, diplomatic and political pressure on the regime. The second track, of which we have limited knowledge, is the humanitarian. Ahmet Davutoğlu has stated that the situation in Hama and Homs resembles Sarajevo and Srebrenica, making the point that this was the old way of dealing with oppositional forces—during the day the regime has the upper hand, during the night the upper hand changes. His point is to say that the case is just as serious if not more so than it was in Sarajevo and Srebrenica. What we understand about the humanitarian component of this plan is that it will include Turkey, the Arab League and the United Nations, which would bring aid to Hama and Homs. The International Red Cross, the Turkish Red Crescent, and if possible, the Syrian Red Crescent will also be part of this effort.

One idea would be to bring this issue to the UN Security Council, even though Russia's immediate reaction after the Sunday meeting was to say that for a peacekeeping mission, there must be a ceasefire or a truce. That is understandable, but maybe there are ways to work for a humanitarian mission regardless, because it would be impossible for outside backers of Syria, namely Russia and China, to object to a purely humanitarian mission. Secretary Clinton has said that we need the regime's consent for that, but we will probably hear more about this plan after the February 24th meeting in Tunisia. What kind of protection would be needed for such a mission remains unclear but the discussions continue on implementing such a mission. Our understanding from the Turkish leadership is that this humanitarian part will be at the forefront. Obviously Turkey continues to support the opposition and tries to isolate the regime internationally by supporting both the humanitarian mission and the Arab League plan, which calls for a political transition aimed at ending the bloodshed, and moving toward a democratic Syria in the long run. The humanitarian aid is not an end in itself but a part of a broader strategy to isolate the regime, force a change in behavior and to keep a level of focus and attention on the issue.

Even though Turkey hosts the leadership of the FSA and the SNC has a permanent office in Istanbul, Turkey is not giving arms to the opposition because rather than exacerbate the situation, Turkey is trying to contain the situation, and Turkey believes a civil war should be avoided at any cost. I know that a lot of people think that it is already a civil war, but such a war in Syria would be on a much larger scale than what we have seen so far. The opposition is not unified, and there is also radicalization of the opposition in the form of al-Qaeda and other organizations. Turkey also wants to avoid a situation where outside groups are supplying arms to Syria, turning Syria into an international proxy war. It is difficult to determine the real situation on the ground, but we have a fairly decent perspective inside the opposition. Even though Turkey is not directly providing arms for Syria, most likely they are tolerating some arms smuggling and will be facilitating the process once the Arab League says they will be supporting the opposition with any means necessary.

Many are asking what Turkey will do other than increase international pressure. I don't see Turkey taking any unilateral military action unless it is provoked by Syria. Military

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**Erol Cebeci:**  
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**Erol Cebeci:**  
The Turkish prime minister and foreign minister have said more than once that they don't want military action but they cannot be silent in the face of the regime's killing and they have alluded to contingency plans, hoping that they won't be needed.

intervention is not on the table for Turkey according to the official position. The Turkish prime minister and foreign minister have said more than once that they don't want military action but they cannot be silent in the face of the regime's killing and they have alluded to contingency plans, hoping that they won't be needed. This is also a way to warn the regime that a buffer zone is not feasible because of the size of the proposed zone. A buffer zone requires a huge military buildup and suppressing air defense systems. The arguments could be made that a humanitarian corridor would require something similar in terms of military backing and it has a greater value in terms of getting support from Russia and China.

Turkish authorities so far are welcoming any refugees that cross the border, but Turkey does not see the current situation as a civil war. In their minds, the definition of a civil war is one sect of civil society fighting with another. So far, the situation is largely that insurgents are fighting with government forces, not with other ethnic groups. A civil war in Syria will be not only a war between Syrians but will be a veritable proxy war. From the two civil wars in the region which involved some outside intervention, Lebanon and Iran, you see that Iran has experience in influencing and benefiting from a civil war—Turkey does not have that type of experience. For better or worse, this civil war scenario has to be considered because if the situation worsens, it will be very difficult to put everything back together again. If there is a political solution, it must be worked on without reducing pressure on the regime. The economy in Syria is taking a huge hit, and with the way the regime is spending, they do not have the hard currency reserves to last the rest of the year.

## QUESTION AND ANSWER

### *Kadir Ustun*

Thank you very much for showing how complicated and difficult the situation is and has been. I just have quick questions and then we'll turn to the audience. Professor Heydemann, you talked about essentially how difficult it is to manage the militarization. If that policy were to be adopted, others would try to manage the militarization in their own ways. What would be the game plan in that instance, once you're supplying, giving training, supplying arms, etc. while others are supporting the regime? The opposition forces are already confronted by various groups from outsides according to reports. What would be the game plan once you start managing the militarization?

### *Steven Heydemann*

Well I think the success of that kind of strategy hinges on putting in place an appropriate framework anchored in clearly understood and agreed upon arrangements right from the very beginning to prevent the splintering and fragmentation to cause efforts to engage with the armed business. If you think about the Friends of Syria group and

the possibility it might offer to put in a coordinated framework through which Arab League governments, the European Union, Turkey, and the United States could all coordinate and agree on a protocol for pursuing this aim of managing militarization in which the counterpart on the Syrian side would be some representation from the civilian opposition perhaps with internal representation. I think what Randa said about the legitimacy deficit of the external representation was quite accurate, so you would have to constitute your Syrian counterparts carefully. But if those frameworks were able to be developed (and I'm not at all naïve about the challenges involved in doing so) then one would hope you could establish binding agreements and binding understandings on governments that might otherwise be inclined to provide arms to actors inside of Syria in an uncoordinated, independent, unregulated fashion. Instead they could work towards a framework to ensure that we're not simply setting up a future for civil conflict inside of Syria in which contending groups separately equipped engage in conflict with one another. There may, as your question sort of suggests, be others who might also want to arm their own proxies, like the Iranians. That could certainly happen. I don't think the potential for others outside to pursue a strategy of meddling in support of armed resistance groups inside of Syria should necessarily preclude us from doing what we can on our side to impose a bit of order and structure on a process that is already underway with very dangerous implications if left unregulated. But it is of course the case that we will encounter challenges to that strategy and Iranian back proxy groups may be among those challenges. But I'm not sure I would let that possibility get in the way of at least making an effort to try to build these frameworks that could avoid the movement of a serious gradual collapse to a fairly troubling war of all against all at some point in the future.

### **Kadir Ustun**

Randa, you talked about "Friends of Syria" group trying to unite the opposition. How would that fundamentally resolve this legitimacy question? As you argue, there is a big disconnect between opposition groups outside and inside Syria. So would uniting the opposition under a large umbrella necessarily change the alienation between the two groups?

Aram, you talked about very little senior defections actually taking place. Do you see any way of encouraging these defections or are these people [regime] in it for their own survival and there is not much hope there except for perhaps Assad being pushed out or major high-level defections. What is the likelihood of those things happening? And, you've studied the military carefully and we've heard from others that they're not actually in a "putting out the fire mode" but that they're much more sophisticated than that and they're moving in a clear direction methodically. Can you comment on that?

And Mr. Cebeci, do you see Turkey increasing the diplomatic and political pressure? Does Turkey have its own game plan? They've told Assad to step down, but if this

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**Steven Heydemann:**  
I don't think the potential for others outside to pursue a strategy of meddling in support of armed resistance groups inside of Syria should necessarily preclude us from doing what we can on our side to impose a bit of order and structure.

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Friends of Syria initiative doesn't go anywhere, what do you see Turkey doing after that?

### **Randa Slim**

In terms of uniting the opposition, building on what the Arab League said, of providing support to the opposition, which would include arming the opposition, the argument would be that we've got to know where the weapons are going and where the maintenance system is going when it goes. The Friends of Syria group is not going to be the appropriate group to manage this uniting effort; it is a platform to launch this initiative but this initiative is to be led by the Arab League, and specifically three countries which have been in the forefront in endorsing the Syrian opposition and calling for tougher action from the Arab League in support of the opposition; namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Tunisia, with the assistance of Turkey, which as Mr. Cebeci said has lots of leverage at play here with the FSA and with the Islamists especially. So, if the Friends of Syria group provides the international legitimacy for launching this kind of subgroup or taskforce that is aimed at uniting the opposition it will go a long way in helping change the perception inside of Syria among minority groups and among the general population that there is a credible alternative to Assad. When you talk to people, you ask them "Why are you sitting on the fence?" or "Why are you not in the streets with the revolution?" supporting the protest movement. There are often two fears. One is that post-Assad governance will be Islamist rule. And the other is that post-Assad rule will mean chaos. And both fears are underpinned by the fact that with the SNC and the way that it is currently structured, the people don't see it as providing a credible alternative to the Assad regime. Once we are able to provide that kind of alternative we could include people from the inside and include minorities. Many leading minority leaders are living in foreign countries right next door to the SNC and they don't join. These are important leaders who carry weight in their community. The same could be said for Alawites and for members of the Christian business community. The SNC has been given enough time. Some argue that with more time they will become better at being the unifier. But they are butting up against the shortage of time because of the growing conditions on the ground and we have to deal with these growing conditions. We need to have a kind of umbrella council, an organization that will provide that alternative and be a convincing alternative to the Assad regime. SNC has failed at it and I don't see from the way that it's made up, the way that it's behaving, or in its current leadership a way to end that.

### **Aram Nerguizian**

Your question is a two part question. In terms of the cycle of defections and desertions, I think we've fundamentally overplayed this line that we're going to see mass defections. There is a considerable amount of information flowing about this in either direc-

**Randa Slim:**  
When you talk to people, you ask them "Why are you sitting on the fence?" or "Why are you not in the streets with the revolution?" supporting the protest movement. There are often two fears. One is that post-Assad governance will be Islamist rule. And the other is that post-Assad rule will mean chaos.



tion, both from the Assad regime and from forces in Syria and outside who are trying to shape the discussion. But first of all, this kind of scenario has always been the worst case scenario of the Assad regime. This is something that goes back decades. You have a level of over-recruiting in the officer corps that is going to make it very difficult to see meaningful defections. I like the term that the FSA used for their units, brigades, but we should be very honest with ourselves about what a brigade is. We're talking about 2,000-3,000 troops per brigade. The reality is that kind of defection hasn't happened. We haven't even had battalion level defections. We haven't had defections from any of the key units that oversee Syria's CW capabilities that are really tied into its electronic warfare capabilities. And that's critical. You're also not going to see defections from Alawites that actually have the metrics that matter in terms of the integrity and capability of the Syrian armed forces. It's one thing for high ranking Sunni officers to defect. It's something else to gauge the quality of the metrics that they have in terms of a security apparatus that they don't control overtly. So it's going to be difficult to see that shift further. Now there is another reason for that which has very little to do with Syria itself and a lot more to do with the fate of militaries in the region when it comes to other countries that have undergone violent and nonviolent transitions. On the one hand, you have the example of Iraq. Something like de-Ba'athification in Syria would have a deeply unsettling effect on the kind of socioeconomic and financial networks that these folks rely on. You also have another element of this like Egypt, where you have an embattled security apparatus trying to be all things to everyone and ending up being nothing to no one with a very questionable future, amid remnants of the Mubarak regime, the Brotherhood, and some of the more stringent Salafi groups. You also have militaries that have really not recovered from the sectarian dimension, which is the case with the Lebanese armed forces which still struggles for its post-war legacy. The Libyan example isn't exactly foreboding. So in all the countries where you've had tribal and sectarian dimensions, where you have had or haven't had intervention but you've seen shifts in the regime, security apparatuses that have their own social welfare structures don't survive. If there had been some bleeding away, there are still far too many who will tie into the regime. The other side of the question is the level of sophistication of the security apparatus's approach. I can see the causal parallel, not to make it sound too politically inappropriate, but there's also a Stalin-type parallel here too when it comes to how the Assad regime is acting in Homs or Hama. And what differs here is that clearly there is a degree of sensitivity within the security apparatus about bringing the kinds of military capability to bear that would really trigger an impromptu or knee jerk response, not unlike the use of aircraft by the Libyans in dealing with their own uprising. So all of these factors tie in. Yes, it's a brutal repression and they're killing their own people, but we have to remember that Homs is a city of over one million people. And the level of fatalities would be much higher if the regime brought to bear its many rocket systems or its other heavy artillery. This isn't to pat them on the back, nothing of the sort. But it does show that there is still some degree of sensitivity to

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**Aram Nerguizian:**  
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international public opinion, especially in terms of their key allies, Russia and China, to continue to make the case on engaging the Assad regime. And to come back to the point of humanitarian corridors, it's very difficult for someone like me to imagine any kind of humanitarian corridor or effort under the new plan that wouldn't have some kind of a green light from the security establishment in Syria. They're not to the point where they don't have oversight and you would have to coordinate with them to some degree. So again, you have a very resilient structure, they are sensitive but not sensitive enough to public opinion and this might be a drawn-out battle.

**Erol Cebeci :**  
Syria is never just Syria, every other country in the region from Jordan to Lebanon, from Iran to Iraq, will be affected by the situation that is going on.

### ***Erol Cebeci***

When Turkey started the Friends of Syria it was a bilateral organization and on good terms with the Assad regime. They thought that it was going to work and they thought that it was going to be able to change the system and stabilize the situation. And then they thought that the Arab League's observer mission was going to work. And we have seen what has been done with the United Nations, where the resolution was reduced to levels that the Russians and Chinese could have accepted. But regardless of what happens with the Friends of Syria, Turkey has a 911 kilometer land border with Syria and nobody is moving; Turkey is there and Syria is there. So we cannot forget or act as if nothing is happening in the region. This is a very crucial security risk for Turkey. So Turkey will do everything to gain the focus and attention of everybody, the international community and the Arab League, on Syria. And Syria is never just Syria, every other country in the region from Jordan to Lebanon, from Iran to Iraq, will be affected by the situation that is going on. One thing, though, is that the Syrian regime believes that they have the full support of Russia at the global level and a 100 percent backing of Iran on the regional level. For the Syrian regime, this is something that they have seen before and survived. But other than the Syrian regime, everyone else, including the Russians and Iranians, know that this is not something that the Syrian regime has faced in the past and that this is different. So it is important for the international community (and even for Russia, who says that it does not have any commitment to the Assad family itself) to bring international support up to reasonable level so that some of the means and tools that are put in place can work. This is one of the things I believe that Turkey is lobbying heavily for on the side of Iran and Russia, that this situation is not what the Assad regime thinks it is.

### ***Muhammad Abdelilah (Syrian human rights activist)***

I want to thank everybody for their great assessment, especially Randa for her exact, detailed excellent assessment of the Syrian opposition. I have a small disagreement with you regarding the Alawite figures in the Syrian National Council- I don't see any Alawite activists or opposition members who has a weight in the opposition or inside the Alawite community...

**Randa Slim**

Yes, I said none of them exist.

**Muhammad Abdelilah**

I don't see them having any because the Alawite community inside Syria isn't letting anyone who defected from the government, including the famous actors protest inside Homs, and their families have been attacked here... About uniting the opposition, I think that's been an excuse used by the international community for not acting, mainly because what Steve said we don't have a plan about Syria. Go there yourself and come back after three months and we will see what's going to happen. And if the opposition is united, that's not going to change a lot because Assad's not going to stop acting. Regarding Turkey, what they can do with the FSA, quite honestly the FSA is comprised mostly of volunteer civilians, not that many armed people or defectors from the army and none of the leaders in Turkey has a real leverage with the people on the ground, they're very decentralized and they don't have connections. The assessment Steve gave is very accurate regarding them, and the point regarding what Turkey can do, the Turkish government has been very talkative about Syria and they did a great job about hosting the refugees in Turkey; however, the bad thing in my personal opinion, the Turkish government always promises-"we're not going to do this" and "this is going to stop" and "in a few weeks if they do not stop we're going to take action" and taking no action frustrated people and Mr. Erdoğan lost the popularity he had in Syria. I have one question for Erol, it's about the recent visits by the Turkish foreign minister to the US, not much was mentioned about this, and one for Aram about the Iranian role in the area because clearly changing the Syrian regime itself interferes with pushing Iran to be more weak and isolated and no one has approached the Syria conflict from this point of view. Thank you.

**Mary Carrick**

I just read a story that came out a couple of days ago, that the guy who took over heading al Qaeda, after Bin Laden died, I don't remember his name, has endorsed this regime change, and I've also been reading that there's all these kinds of al Qaeda people in there amongst these freedom fighters, a lot of them came from Libya because we were also endorsing... al Qaeda people have been fighting in all these other countries, and I was just wondering why all these countries in the west are calling for us to support this overthrow especially since all these minority religions could be persecuted or probably slaughtered?

**Barbara Slavin (Atlantic Council)**

Randa, what, in your view, could actually get Assad to step down? Is there some combination of economic pressure or other pressure that could convince the family to go into

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**Muhammad Abdelilah:**  
About uniting the opposition, I think that's been an excuse used by the international community for not acting, mainly because what Steve said we don't have a plan about Syria.

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**Steven Heydemann:** Friends of Syria framework, in effect, is sending a signal to the Syrian opposition that they now have to get their act together.

exile? Are there any potential replacements in the Alawite community or the establishment that has supported Assad like Farouk al-Sharaa for example?

### ***Ali (Activists for Syria)***

I wanted to add to what she said and what Aram said that military intervention could stabilize Syria and make? And she did say Al Qaeda wants to intervene and the Muslim Brotherhood and Jordan wants to intervene and I think we all know Iran has been intervening, so the question is, I think we don't want to intervene to cause a lot of chaos, we don't have a buffer zone, we don't have humanitarian corridor, we don't want to have Turkey there, and the rogue state, so there's a lot of talk about what could happen if we arm the opposition. What's interesting is it is going into a civil war if it hasn't gotten there already. If we don't participate, meaning the EU, the UN, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda are already looking to participate. So, I think this argument that arming the opposition and intervening is going to make Syria much worse is actually incorrect in that, in the long term, Syria will actually be much worse if we don't. So we should probably get a hand in it now rather than let it be a playing field for Iran, Al Qaeda, and other groups.

### ***Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff (Syrian Emergency Task Force)***

There has been a lot of discussion about American foreign policy towards the opposition and the revolution at large. If the US and its allies are not going to consider arming the FSA, or arming these elements, then why is the state department and why are our European allies not making a better effort to at least support the pro-democracy elements of the revolution because when we approach states saying, "Hey we have people needing phones, they need help, they need asylum, they need the ability to keep organizing," the action has been quite mute.

### ***Steven Heydemann***

I think in terms of Mohammed Abdelilah's observation about the opposition, you were exactly right up to a point. It is absolutely the case that the West and the Arab League felt it was critical for purposes of legitimacy and consolidation that the Arab opposition work organically to build an effective infrastructure for the representation of Syrians in support of this uprising. That has changed and the Friends of Syria framework, in effect, is sending a signal to the Syrian opposition that they now have to get their act together, that an opportunity exists for them to interact at a much higher, much more tightly coordinated level, with a broad range of international actors. They now have to demonstrate that they have the capacity to serve as an effective interlocutor in this process. If this is not a sufficient incentive for the Syrian National Council or some other set of opposition activists to respond and to figure out how to overcome the obstacles that have prevented the development of an effective representational framework,

then it really will begin to be time to look at the alternatives. The people engaged in the Friends of Syria are aware of that because there is also recognition of the need to reach out to the local coordinates as part of this effort of supporting the resistance. I talked with a State Department official who said that we will not be limiting our outreach to the Syrian National Council, that we will be going into the Homs Revolutionary Council, that we will be working with the LCCs, that we will be looking for effective opposition representation wherever we can find it. That too is part of a warning to the SNC in effect, "you got to get your act together, you know we waited a long time for you, and maybe you felt that there weren't adequate incentives to induce you to get beyond your own internal dysfunction to pull it together, but that's changed, and now it's time."

### **Randa Slim**

To build on that, I don't think the SNC will be able to get their act together. I know, and I think that's why we need to move beyond a SNC pivotal strategy about the opposition and start thinking about what's bigger than this, and see eventually we can include the SNC. Now in terms of Barbara's question, what it is going to take for Assad to step down. Sharaa has no legitimacy outside the structure. I'm pretty sure that Assad when he heard the Arab League proposal he said, "what did they do to me?" and he has been silent ever since and keeping his head down. So, that's what the Arab League is saying. He steps aside and gives his power to Sharaa. I don't see Sharaa as having the stamina, the gravitas, the position, the authority, the political base, to be able to build this on his own, but I can see Sharaa playing this role in the future, that I can. I can see an Arab League transition plan that will include Sharaa as a way to reassure Baath figures. What's going to bring Assad to step down is that he has to become convinced he cannot win this fight. He and his people around him are still convinced that they can win this fight. It's only that realization that will bring him to the table and eventually to a Yemen-like brokered plan along the lines of the Arab League but with having the support of the Russians which will have the support of the Iranians. Aram will talk about the Iranians and I have been studying what Hezbollah's position is and what is going on in Syria. The worst case scenario in Syria for Iran and Hezbollah is a Sunni-led regime that is hostile to Iran and Hezbollah. Absent that, they will be able to maneuver around alternative scenarios, that will at least guarantee not a close alliance between the next regime in Syria and Iran, but a relationship between the two that will protect Hezbollah, which remains Iran's main interest.

On the topic of al-Qaeda in Syria, it is very opportunistic of them to project itself as a player still in the Arab scene when all the Arab uprisings have delegitimized the narrative of al-Qaeda and have totally pushed them aside. It has done that in Libya and Egypt and now it's doing that in Syria. Now, are there jihadist fighters coming? Yes, of course when I knew of calls in Saudi mosques for the support of our brethren in Syria, I can see people coming on their own or funded by some people inside Saudi. The most depressing factor for me is the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and for them to come to the point of polling for support for the FSA when this is a group that parted ways with the Syria... (Heydemann interrupts)

**Randa Slim:**  
What's going to bring Assad to step down is that he has to become convinced he cannot win this fight.





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**Erol Cebeci:**  
If you look at the countries who took different types of risks and what their relationship was before and after, we have to be fair that probably the largest change in terms of policy is Turkey.

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**Steven Heydemann**

This is partly a wave of oppression by King Abdullah.

**Randa Slim**

I fully agree with you, but still, that kind of shift in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood that has under the last minute been a supporter of Assad and his assistance, that in my opinion is a more telling sign of the anger and the mobilization that is happening inside the Arab streets, as a result of what they are seeing on TV, in homes. The Sunni street is angry and actively mobilized, and we have seen what that means in Iraq and we might see the same thing in Syria.

**Erol Cebeci**

On the comment that Turkey talks the talk, but doesn't take the action, I understand how the friends of Turkey set their expectations, which differ tremendously from country to country. If you look at the countries who took different types of risks and what their relationship was before and after, we have to be fair that probably the largest change in terms of policy is Turkey, which has seriously and sincerely reshaped certain processes. Immediately after the United Nations veto they went to the Friends of Syria. Now, I know the simple logic says arm the opposition and make the corridor and sometimes I myself feel that way. Maybe this would be easier, but I have neither the expertise nor the knowledge nor the experience of both the military experts and experts who have dealt with opposition movements. For Turkey, however, I know the decision making processes and Turkey does not make easy decisions and it is a process. I'm not just alluding to bureaucracy, I'm saying that once they subscribe to a motion they will give it a chance but they will calculate the risks also. With our conversations, a lot of the people who have the best intentions think that this should be quick, because if it is a long process it will cost more in terms of human lives, but, as Aram alluded, military intervention, when you calculate the number of human losses with the population density and all of those things, these are not easy calculations. I do understand the feeling and I tremendously respect it but also, when the governments act, they have a certain level of constraints that have to be understood also.

**Kadir Ustun**

Civil war already, they're saying. Why not?

**Aram Nerguizian**

Well, let's go to the wildcard questions. First of all, the Iranian role in Syria, doesn't that weaken Iran? Iran has proven since 1982 that one of the things they're best at is fighting indirect proxy wars. And there's no reason to assume that a Syria which is not under the

control of a pro-Iranian regime like the Assad regime will somehow magically not be an arena for proxy competition with Iran anymore. You have Iraqi elements that are tied to Tehran that are willing to play that role. Iraq's Shiite leadership has its own reasons to weaken any potential Sunni structure that comes to dominate in Syria. And frankly, the reality is that the road to hell is paved with all sorts of good intentions. When it comes to this idea that this is going to be an easy transition, in a best case scenario, even in that best case scenario, you're going to look at an environment where Iran will try to recalibrate and where this perception of loss will gradually turn into some kind of a grudging proxy war that could last for years. I don't see why they can't continue to support their key regional allies such as Hezbollah which is for all intents and purposes the equivalent of Sparta in Lebanon. The rumors of its weakening in wake of instability have been greatly exaggerated. They're still a critical component of the Iranian security calculus and they have a critical role to play in inter-Lebanese affairs as well. The al-Qaeda wildcard and the future of minorities—it's very difficult to look at the dynamics in Syria and in a stone-cold way say that the al-Qaeda wildcard doesn't trouble any western approach to instability in Syria. It's one thing for Zawahiri to make grandiose and pompous statements; it's something else if you do have more and more reporting from within the US intelligence community and within the US government structure that these kinds of presences are real, that you do have militant presences in the country. We have to remember the fact that the Syrian regime's security apparatus was instrumental in ushering to Iraq a lot of these jihadists, this means that they understand the security parameters in place better than anybody else. So this does present all kinds of problems for the future. And whether its militant jihad, whether it's proxy warfare, whether it's military intervention, minorities will be arguably some of the most critical losers. In Iraq, any minority that matters has been depleted by about 70 to 80 percent. That's the statistic more or less and there's no reason why that shouldn't happen in Syria. And lastly, won't Syria be much worse if we don't interfere and if we don't do something militarily? Again, it's one of those things where short-term gain quickly evaporates into a long-term muddying of the waters. We don't know who the players are in-country in terms of the future security landscape in Syria, we don't know whether any of the people we like will actually be in charge in a post-Assad structure, and we also have to remember another factor that really didn't come up in this discussion, which is while the United States and the West agrees with some of the key points of the Gulf-led Arab League effort, there are fundamental differences in approach between how some of the key players in the Gulf states are willing to approach a post-Assad structure and how the West might. And I don't exactly put a lot of stock in the idea that a monarchy-led Gulf structure can be the herald for democracy in Syria. So these dynamics are far more nuanced and the instability is largely speculative today but likely we'll have long-term ramifications.

### **Kadir Ustun**

Thank you very much but I have to close and we will continue afterwards. Thank you very much for joining us today.

**Aram Nerguizian:**  
We don't know who the players are in-country in terms of the future security landscape in Syria.



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