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Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change

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SYRIA IS TRAPPED ON A CRUMBLING PRECIPICE, and however it might fall will entail significant risks for the United States and for the Syrian people.

The brutal regime of Bashar al-Asad is employing its loyal military forces and sectarian thugs to crush the opposition and reassert its tyranny. Even if Bashar fails, Syria may not be out of the woods: an increasingly likely alternative to the current regime is a bloody civil war similar to what we saw in Lebanon, Bosnia, Congo, and most recently in Iraq. The horrors of such a war might even exceed the brutal reassertion of Asad's control, and would cause spillover into Syria's neighbors—Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel—that could be disastrous for them and for American interests in the Middle East.¹

But the unrest in Syria, which is now entering its second year, also offers some important opportunities, ones that would come from the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Asad, whose family has ruled the country with an iron grip for over forty years. Syria is Iran's oldest and most important ally in the Arab world, and the Iranian regime has doubled down on Asad, providing him with financial aid and military support to shore up his regime. Asad's departure would deal a significant blow to Tehran, further isolating it at a time when it has few friends in the region or the world. In addition, Damascus is steadfast in its hostility toward Israel, and Asad's regime is also a longtime supporter of terrorist groups like Hizballah and Hamas, and has at times aided al-Qa'ida terrorists and former regime

elements in Iraq. The regime's collapse, therefore, could have significant benefits for the United States and its allies in the region.

Actually ousting Asad, however, will not be easy. Although the Obama administration has for months called for Asad to go, every policy option to remove him is flawed, and some could even make the situation worse—seemingly a recipe for inaction. Doing nothing, however, means standing by while Asad murders his own people, and Syria plunges into civil war and risks becoming a failed state. Already the violence is staggering: as of March 2012, at least 8,000 Syrians have died and thousands more have been arrested and tortured in trying to topple the regime. At the same time, Syria is fragmenting. The Syrian opposition remains divided, and the Free Syrian Army is more a brand than a meaningful, unified force. Al-Qa'ida is urging fighters to join the fray in Syria, and sectarian killings and atrocities are growing. Should the violence continue to intensify, Syria's neighbors may increase their meddling, and instability could spread, further weakening already-fragile neighbors like Iraq and Lebanon.

So to protect U.S. interests, Asad cannot triumph. But a failed Syria, one wracked by civil war, would be just as bad. Thus, U.S. policy must walk this tightrope, trying to remove Asad, but doing so in a way that keeps Syria an intact state capable of policing its borders and ensuring order at home. At the end of the day, however, removing Asad may not be doable

at a price the United States is willing to pay. If so, the U.S. government may be forced to choose between living with a brutal but weakened Asad or getting rid of Asad regardless of the consequences.

This memo lays out six options for the United States to consider to achieve Asad's overthrow, should it choose to do so:

1. Removing the regime via diplomacy;
2. Coercing the regime via sanctions and diplomatic isolation;
3. Arming the Syrian opposition to overthrow the regime;
4. Engaging in a Libya-like air campaign to help an opposition army gain victory;
5. Invading Syria with U.S.-led forces and toppling the regime directly; and
6. Participating in a multilateral, NATO-led effort to oust Asad and rebuild Syria.

The options are complex, and policymakers will probably try to combine several in an attempt to accentuate the positives and minimize the negatives, which will inevitably be difficult and bring out new complications. But by focusing on discrete approaches, this memo helps expose their relative strengths and weaknesses. For each course of action, this memo describes the strategy inherent to the option and what it would entail in practice. It also assesses the option's advantages and disadvantages.

This memo does not endorse any particular policy option. Rather, it seeks to explain the risks and benefits of possible courses of action at this moment in time. As conditions change, some options may become more practical or desirable and others less so. The authors mostly agree on the advantages and disadvantages of each approach but weigh the relative rewards and costs differently.

OPTION ONE ONE LAST CHANCE: MAKING DIPLOMACY WORK

International diplomacy has failed to keep up with the increasingly bloody and militarized situation in

Syria. The inability of the international community to reach consensus has led many to question whether diplomacy alone can resolve the crisis. Still, more effective diplomacy could be crucial to managing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict better and, in theory, could make it more likely that Asad would step down. Diplomacy, moreover, is relatively low cost. Even with the United States putting its prestige behind diplomacy, this course of action would not involve the domestic political capital, military risk, or monetary costs that the other options discussed in this memo would. So far, however, diplomacy has made at most limited progress, with divisions among key actors precluding strong action.

In February 2012, a group of 137 countries passed a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Asad regime's crackdown and supporting the Arab League's transition plan. But the Arab League's efforts have likely gone as far as they could go, given the differences between the Gulf states and countries like Sudan and Algeria, which remain uneasy about regime change and interference in the internal affairs of a fellow league member (Asad is not liked, but he is not the pariah Qadhafi was). Iraq and Lebanon's discomfort at supporting strong measures show their sensitivity to Iran and the heightened Sunni-Shi'i tensions in the region.

The core of the U.S. diplomatic approach has been the establishment of the "Friends of Syria" group—an Arab-led international coalition that includes Europe and key regional actors such as Turkey. While in theory this coalition is relatively more nimble than the UN, it took months to form and has revealed the limits of each of its principal actors. It has been marred by a lack of Arab unity, U.S. hesitation to lead, and Turkish reluctance to act—despite the strong rhetoric of its leadership—because of possible Syrian or Iranian retaliation.

But the biggest obstacle to international unity has been the position taken by Russia and China. Both have shown that they oppose regime change in Syria through international intervention, including on humanitarian grounds. Russia's rhetoric stresses that it felt burned by the move from civilian protection

to regime change in Libya, and makes known that it does not want to repeat this in Syria. The reasons behind Russia's position are clear: Syria is Russia's last remaining close Arab ally, and Moscow is not prepared to risk the political and economic losses in a post-Asad Syria that it suffered in Libya. Russia, focused on its fight against Islamists in its southern underbelly in Chechnya and Dagestan, also worries that a post-Asad Syria will be dominated by Islamists, who would be hostile to Moscow. Finally, Moscow, along with Beijing, is determined to resist setting still another precedent that the international community has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, particularly one resolute on suppressing internal dissent however it sees fit. Many experts believe that Russian and Chinese leaders fear that at some point they may have to do the same and they do not want to empower foreigners to meddle in their internal politics. For them, regime change through foreign dictate is not an option this time.

would escalate significantly even with the UN's blessing). Continuing to support UN efforts is one way to step up the diplomatic campaign and strengthen the international community's resolve in achieving its immediate humanitarian aims and eventually helping to enforce its longer-term political goals. The new UN and Arab League envoy, former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, is trying to coordinate a plan to halt the violence, which, if successful, would create the space for the international community (through the special envoy, the Friends of Syria group, and with the Russians and Chinese) to work on a political resolution based on the Arab League's transition plan.

The diplomatic solution rests on a key assumption: that reversing Russia's protection of the Asad regime in the Security Council is actually possible. To many, Russia's two vetoes and continued supply of arms to Asad prove otherwise, and any diplomatic solution that includes Moscow is likely to fail. Bypassing

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With the critical protection of Russia and China, and support of Iran, Asad has thus far fended off diplomatic efforts. In the words of the UN secretary-general, "The inaction—of the international community seems to have encouraged the Syrian authorities in their brutal suppression of its citizens."² As testament to this, the Russian and Chinese vetoes on October 4, 2011 preceded a more violent effort by Damascus that doubled the number of those killed in a matter of weeks, while their vetoes on February 5, 2012 came just as the regime unleashed its assault on Homs.

The Obama administration, despite its exasperation with Russian and Chinese vetoes, has doggedly pursued a UN Security Council resolution that would authorize action in Syria (the administration has made clear that it is reluctant to take action in the "complicated" Syria situation without obtaining an international mandate, though it is not clear whether the administration

Russia, however, is not without its dangers. It risks embroiling the United States and its allies in a costly and dangerous Cold War-style competition along the strategically important Syria fault-line, or worse. Russia could continue to arm and fund the regime, enabling Asad to defy international pressure indefinitely. Taking actions without a UN mandate would also likely only add to the unraveling of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, in as much as it emphasizes the need for UN-legitimated authority.

A key aspect of any diplomatic solution would have to be an exile option for Asad and his family, which could be best explored through the Arab League. For now, Asad is ensconced in power, but having an option for a peaceful exit that does not force him and his family to face certain death may make his departure more likely, though it would not lead to an end of the regime if his cronies retain power.

The diplomatic option therefore should entail the United States continuing to convince Vladimir Putin that Russian interests lie in supporting a political transition in Syria and that Moscow has an important role to play in this regard. An intensification of the Arab League's and the GCC's-Russia strategic dialogues should also be encouraged, as the relationship is now in danger of faltering. Key states like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt should redouble efforts to persuade Russia and other hold-outs to join the diplomatic campaign against Asad.

However, even if diplomacy overcame all these obstacles, there is a significant chance that diplomacy alone would still fail. Asad and his loyalists have proven that they are willing to withstand growing international isolation. Indeed, they seem to care little about international legitimacy and have escalated their violence in the face of international opprobrium.

Diplomatic "success," moreover, may not be able to ensure a credible transition to a post-Asad Syria. There is a danger that diplomacy may achieve only a partial transition in the short term, with the prospect of durable stability in question, as has been the case in Yemen. As with other policy options, successful transition in the long term would therefore rest on the ability of Syrians to unite around a common vision for Syria and the continued role of key international actors in encouraging that transition. But the fact that the Syrian opposition are not united, arguing over issues of both substance and of leadership, may not bode well for a healthy political transition.

An alternative is for diplomatic efforts to focus first on how to end the violence and how to gain humanitarian access, as is being done under Annan's leadership. This may lead to the creation of safe-havens and humanitarian corridors, which would have to be backed by limited military power.³ This would, of course, fall short of U.S. goals for Syria and could preserve Asad in power. From that starting point, however, it is possible that a broad coalition with the appropriate international mandate could add further coercive action to its efforts.

Clearly time is an issue. In Bosnia, where the conflict continued for an agonizing four years before the

international community intervened, the suffering was enormous, and similar tolerance for the human rights abuses of the Asad regime could produce even more bloodshed and displacement. Working with its Arab, regional, and Western partners, Washington can push for a more effective humanitarian response and pave the way for more aggressive intervention options to topple Asad.

OPTION TWO

BUILDING A BETTER MOUSETRAP: REGIME CHANGE THROUGH COERCION

The United States' current Syria policy falls under the rubric of "coercive diplomacy." It has three key features: isolating the Asad regime diplomatically, imposing crippling economic sanctions, and providing non-military support to the opposition. This approach requires relatively little political capital at home because it does not involve direct military action or even the arming of the Syrian opposition.

"Patience" is the watchword in Washington. "We're all waiting for the thing that will crack them," an administration official recently said, referring to Asad and his clique. "And it will be the economy that will wake everybody up...."⁴ The logic of coercive diplomacy is that economic pressure will conspire with the continued unrest and the regime's international isolation so as to encourage defections from the military and other power centers.

So far, sanctions—and escalating violence—have hurt Syria's economy, leading to a run on its currency, capital flight, and a collapse of many private businesses. As a result, Asad has lost support among some in Syria's middle class. However, the regime is finding work-arounds and is receiving financial support from Iran, offsetting the pressure somewhat. (In other cases, sanctions have at times actually strengthened autocratic regimes by concentrating economic power in their hands even as their countries' economies have suffered.)

A coercive diplomacy policy rests on one critical assumption: that, as President Obama stated, Asad's "days are numbered. It's a matter not of if, but when."⁵

Unfortunately, this assumption might prove wrong. Recent Arab history furnishes examples of leaders willing and able to absorb severe shocks and still hang on for years. In 1991, for example, Saddam Hussein suffered a devastating military defeat, which in turn triggered simultaneous Kurdish and Shi'i uprisings. Although Saddam lost control of large swaths of Iraqi territory, he still clung to power.

Despite the dramatic challenge to Asad's rule, he might yet lift a page from Saddam's playbook. Therefore, Washington's current policy toward Syria may not end in Asad's fall. It might, instead, produce an alternative outcome: a prolonged and bloody stalemate. The Syrian state might lose control of some of its territory, and the opposition would doubtless forge links with outside actors, but the regime would remain in conflict with the opposition and the international community.

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To mitigate these risks, Washington would need to consider a number of steps that would augment the coercive dimension of its diplomacy. In conjunction with its allies, the United States could implement a maritime blockade to stop goods from entering Syrian ports, though this would of course not stop overland smuggling or trade. Washington could signal a firm intention to take significant diplomatic action outside of the framework of the United Nations and the Arab League. One way to do so would be for the United States to form a small contact group (including Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and France) dedicated to increasing the pressure on Asad. The mere existence of such a group with punitive goals would add to the pressure on the regime and hopefully dissuade others from conducting "business as

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This result would be a setback for the Syrian people and U.S. interests throughout the region. Asad's mere survival would be read as a victory for Iran and its "rejectionist" front. Tehran has "supplied equipment, weapons and technical assistance—even monitoring tools—to help suppress unrest," one American with access to classified intelligence recently stated. "Iranian security officials also traveled to Damascus to help deliver this assistance," the official added.⁶ The Russians, too, have supplied weapons to Damascus, while simultaneously offering vital diplomatic backing. Particularly helpful for Syria has been their support in the United Nations Security Council, where the Russians have successfully stymied American efforts to increase the pressure on Asad. As a result, throughout the Middle East the conflict in Syria is seen as a lopsided proxy war. On one side, the Iranians and the Russians actively help the regime; on the other, the United States, Europe, and regional allies give the opposition more limited support. A stalemate in Syria would benefit Russia and Iran, and also damage the

usual" with Damascus. As discussed above, the existing Friends of Syria group has become too large and unwieldy, given the differences among the members. Forming a smaller, sub-group outside the United Nations could therefore make it easier to get things done while retaining a multilateral framework.

In doing so, the United States could bypass Moscow whenever the Russians refuse to contribute unambiguously to the anti-Asad effort. The United States could certainly continue trying to entice Russia into abandoning Asad with concessions in other areas, but success is not likely, at least not at a price Washington should be willing to pay. The Russian track record of support for Asad should lead Washington to assume that any effective action will have to take place despite, not because of, Russian policy. Washington would also have to judge whether more provocative measures like a maritime blockade would lead to a direct Russian challenge.

Turkey's participation would be vital for success, and Washington would have to encourage the Turks to play a more helpful role than they have so far. While Ankara has lost all patience with Damascus, it has taken few concrete steps that would increase the pressure on Asad (and thereby antagonize Tehran). Turkish policy toward the Syrian opposition has actually worked at cross-purposes with American efforts to foster a broad, unified national organization. With an eye to its own domestic Kurdish dilemmas, Ankara has frustrated efforts to integrate the Syrian Kurds into a broader opposition framework. In addition, it has overtly favored the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood over all other opposition groups. Washington must impress upon Turkey the need to be more accommodating of legitimate Kurdish political and cultural demands in a post-Asad Syria, and to be less insistent on the primacy of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Some voices in Washington and Jerusalem are exploring whether Israel could contribute to coercing Syrian elites to remove Asad. The Israelis have the region's most formidable military, impressive intelligence services, and keen interests in Syria. In addition, Israel's intelligence services have a strong knowledge of Syria, as well as assets within the Syrian regime that could be used to subvert the regime's power base and press for Asad's removal. Israel could posture forces on or near the Golan Heights and, in so doing, might divert regime forces from suppressing the opposition. This posture may conjure fears in the Asad regime of a multi-front war, particularly if Turkey is willing to do the same on its border and if the Syrian opposition is being fed a steady diet of arms and training. Such a mobilization could perhaps persuade Syria's military leadership to oust Asad in order to preserve itself. Advocates argue this additional pressure could tip the balance against Asad inside Syria, if other forces were aligned properly.

A greater Israeli contribution to the coercion campaign, however, must be handled carefully, and it could backfire in a variety of ways. The regime is likely to prioritize the internal threat over external pressure and may judge that the danger of invasion is low and that it could use any incursion to rally its people against the foreigners. Any diversion of forces would

begin with less trusted troops, while truly loyal units continue to go after opposition strongholds.

Additionally, Israeli participation would vastly complicate the regional diplomacy behind any effort to remove Asad and, in particular, may also weaken the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition. Iran, Hizballah, and of course the Syrian regime would cry foul, trying to paint the opposition as Zionist pawns—an argument that may have particular resonance among many Arabs and could thus prevent some Arab governments from providing robust support to a transitional government. However, as the violence in Syria gets worse and the regional consequences mount, some area regimes may tolerate, or even privately welcome, a discreet Israeli role.

Ultimately, the coercion in question will be difficult to achieve, as the external powers are asking the regime to give up power—the ultimate demand. Therefore, the United States may opt to focus the contact group on achieving select gains. Because creating a unified national opposition is a long-term project that will probably never fully succeed, the contact group, while not abandoning this effort, may seek more realistic goals. For example, it might concentrate maximum effort on breaking Asad's hold on, say, the elite of Aleppo, which is the commercial capital and which is also the city where Turkey has the greatest leverage. If Aleppo were to fall to the opposition, the demoralizing effect on the regime would be considerable.

Should this option fail, the United States can simply accept a bad situation in Syria or escalate to one of the military options below.

OPTION THREE **GIVE THEM THE TOOLS: ARMING THE** **SYRIAN OPPOSITION**

The United States and its allies could arm the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other anti-regime forces to try to carry out regime change on their own. Rhetorically, the United States is already moving in this direction, with repeated high-level statements noting that the United States will not rule out arming the opposition should current efforts fail. Moreover, as

opposition requests for help get more desperate, there are growing reports that Gulf states are sending weapons to the opposition via their local partners in Iraq and Lebanon.

A U.S. or allied-armed opposition could gain victory in two ways: the FSA could defeat Syria's armed forces and conquer the country, or it could continue to gain strength and dishearten regime stalwarts, leading to mass defections or even a coup that causes the regime to collapse. The FSA would then become the new Syrian army, subordinate to an elected Syrian government, with the mission of ensuring the country remains stable and has protected borders.

That is the hope. The current reality is that the Syrian opposition forces are weak and despite a year of violence are finding it difficult to unite. Sect, ethnicity, region, strategy, and leadership all divide the opposition. They lack a unifying vision, a charismatic leadership, and an internal process to ensure all Syrian voices are represented. There is little, if any, coordination between elements operating in different parts of the country though their ability to continue protests in the face of horrific regime repression suggests that local organization remains impressive. The FSA, for its part, is currently poorly armed, disorganized, and divided from the broader political opposition movement. To make matters more complex, there is also a deep schism between FSA forces in Syria, doing the bulk of the fighting, and the FSA leadership outside it.

Thus, if the United States were to embrace the policy of arming the opposition, a key initial step would be to make the opposition more coherent. This would entail first gaining a better understanding of Syria's tribal, religious, ethnic, and community structures and their affiliations, and then using money, recognition, and arms as an incentive to push the FSA and Syrian opposition political groups like the Syrian National Council (SNC) to work together. The same tools would then have to be used to push for military integration and a unified command.

Support from Syria's neighbors like Jordan and particularly Turkey would be vital to this option. These

allies would have to provide secure bases for the opposition on Syria's borders, protected by their own armed forces. Their militaries could do much of the arming and training, in conjunction with the United States. Area intelligence services, perhaps including Israel's, could also work behind the scenes to undermine Asad's regime and bolster the opposition.

However, securing Turkey's and Jordan's participation may be challenging because both Amman and Ankara appear reluctant to host a Syrian opposition army involved in large-scale operations. They fear Syrian vengeance in the form of terrorism or support for unrest on their own soil, and would have to be convinced that the risk was worth the effort; they may even need to be provided with security guarantees and assistance. In addition, Jordan and Turkey would fear that arming the opposition and escalating the fighting could lead to spillover into their own countries or into Iraq and Lebanon, inflaming strife throughout the region. Given the fragility of all of Syria's Arab neighbors, stoking the flames of Syria's civil war should not be undertaken lightly, and arming the opposition might require Western support to all of Syria's neighbors to help them cope with spillover.

On paper, arming the opposition offers many advantages. First, because the opposition represents the majority of Syrians, numbers are on their side, in terms of manpower. Second, if Syrians were to liberate their own country it would be beneficial for the post-Asad era, giving a replacement regime legitimacy. Third, this approach does not require intervention by the armed forces of a neighboring country (at least in theory), thereby limiting the chance of a proxy war in the struggle to oust Asad or determine his replacement. As a result, it also eliminates the risk of an embarrassing defeat that might foster instability in the neighboring country. Finally, America's cost and risk would be low: no U.S. forces would be on the ground and providing arms to the opposition would cost millions, not billions. U.S. allies would do much of the heavy lifting in any event. In addition, even if the option fails, the United States might score points with democratic forces in the region that are looking for proof that Washington is backing the foes of dictatorship. The opposite is also true: failing to even

arm the opposition might convince many Arabs that the United States is uninterested in democracy in the Middle East and prefers stable autocracies to unpredictable democracies.

However, despite the advantages of this policy, there are some large obstacles and risks to success. While history is replete with states arming opposition groups to weaken their rivals, the precedents for the opposition succeeding quickly in regime change are fewer. When the United States armed the anti-Soviet *mujahedin* in Afghanistan, they bled the Soviets and eventually forced their departure, but it took several years more for Afghanistan's Communist regime to fall, at which point the insurgents fell to fighting among themselves. Afghanistan was not reunified until the Taliban took control and even then the Taliban did not control all of the country (and the Taliban, which received direct support from the Pakistani military, was of course hostile to the United States). The Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, which received support from Liberia, did briefly take over

least, the opposition will need large numbers of small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars to try to cope with the regime's fire power, but even then, light infantry (especially poorly-trained light infantry) has typically faced significant challenges fighting mechanized formations backed by massive fire power, including in built-up urban areas. It is possible that arming the opposition might increase the chances of defection of Sunni units and create areas within Syria where the opposition would enjoy a certain degree of freedom. However, unless regime forces defect en masse (possible but not necessarily likely), this would not lead to Asad's fall.

Even if the opposition unexpectedly gained victory, there is considerable risk that they would not be able to unite to rule Syria. A fractious, undemocratic, and well-armed opposition could engage in reprisals and install an undemocratic (or at least illiberal) successor regime. In addition, because of the ready availability of small arms in the region and the willingness of some anti-Asad states to act on their own, the desir-

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much of the country, but it was operating in a largely anarchic area rather than against a strong government like Asad's. In most cases, supporting an opposition ties down a country's forces and fosters instability but does not topple the regime.

Militarily, the task of toppling the regime is considerable. The Syrian military is hardly the *Wehrmacht*, but it is far more formidable than the lightly armed and untrained opposition. Although it only has several divisions of guaranteed loyalty, this may be enough. Few senior military leaders have defected, and the growth of sectarian violence has so far led some minorities, particularly the dominant Alawi community, to rally around the regime. The regime has large numbers of tanks and artillery that can crush opposition ranks via brute force, which the regime has painfully proven it is willing to use. At the very

ability of greater military efficiency probably would not be enough of an incentive to convince the opposition to unify unless outside powers are able to control, or at least influence, the scale and direction of the arms flow. The disparate interests of Syria's neighbors, and their interaction with the opposition's fissures, would make this a challenge, even if America and its allies all speak with one voice.

The United States might still arm the opposition even knowing they will probably never have sufficient power, on their own, to dislodge the Asad network. Washington might choose to do so simply in the belief that at least providing an oppressed people with some ability to resist their oppressors is better than doing nothing at all, even if the support provided has little chance of turning defeat into victory. Alternatively, the United States might calculate that it is still

worthwhile to pin down the Asad regime and bleed it, keeping a regional adversary weak, while avoiding the costs of direct intervention. During the Cold War, the United States supported a number of insurgencies around the world, not expecting they would triumph but hoping they would weaken pro-Soviet regimes. However, some in Washington may decide that supporting an opposition bound to fail might worsen the civil war without hastening Asad's end—the worst of all outcomes.

Should this approach fail, there are obvious escalatory options—an advantage or a disadvantage. The diplomatic and military support for the opposition attempted for this approach would be useful for Options Four, Five, and Six (see below). At the same time, the U.S. and allied association with the opposition would make it difficult to walk away from them and from Syria if, as is likely, they continue to suffer setbacks or slaughter at the hands of regime forces. Thus pressure to adopt more costly options would grow.

OPTION FOUR

LIBERATION FROM ABOVE: AIR POWER AND THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

Because of the limitations of the Syrian opposition and their uncertain ability to bring down the Asad regime on their own, a critical question is whether the United States and allied countries might provide air support in addition to arms and training, as the United States did for Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in 2001 and NATO did for the Libyan opposition in 2011. The theory here is that powerful American air support could tip the balance in favor of the FSA without miring American ground troops in the fight that will have to be waged for Syria's cities and mountain fastnesses. In crass terms, the hope is that the United States could fight a "clean" war from 10,000 feet and leave the dirty work on the ground to the FSA, perhaps even obviating a massive commitment to Iraq-style nation-building. Because of the much greater cost and lengthy duration of post-war reconstruction, as well as the obvious unpleasant experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, the potential to relieve the United States from this task appears to be a key selling point for some of this policy's advocates.

The real question is whether it will work.

The first time that the United States tried such an approach was in Kosovo in 1999. Washington provided training (via private military contractors) and arms to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and led a NATO air campaign against the Serbian armed forces. Ultimately, Slobodan Milosevic backed down in what seemed to be a clear win for this style of intervention. However, there are at least two important caveats for this story's applicability to Syria. First, Milosevic was not being ousted from power (that would follow some months later), but rather coerced into halting his effort to hold on to Kosovo through violence. In other words, the threshold for "success" in Kosovo was much lower than it would be in Syria. Second, in seventy-eight days of airstrikes, NATO did distressingly little damage to the Serbian army, and the KLA could not make a dent in the Serbian defenses. The scope and scale of airstrikes had to be continually increased, and even then Milosevic only conceded after Russia abandoned him and NATO (particularly the United States) began a major ground build-up in neighboring Albania that would have given President Clinton the option of mounting a ground invasion.

Twelve years later, when the United States attacked Afghanistan after 9/11, the Bush administration turned to the same strategy. Unlike Kosovo, Afghanistan was a clear victory: the U.S. ground presence was meager, and the stated goal was always to overthrow the Taliban (and destroy its al-Qa'ida allies). Still, there are important differences between Afghanistan and Syria. The Afghan opposition that the United States supported was the experienced and well-led Northern Alliance, which had given the Taliban fits for years, and the addition of U.S. air power really was all that they needed. The Taliban was not an organized, professional military, and had few heavy weapons and little discipline. Moreover, in Afghanistan there were clear battle lines between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, making it far easier for U.S. air power to batter Taliban defensive positions and tear up their logistical lines. In contrast, the FSA bears absolutely no resemblance to the Northern Alliance, the Syrian military has demonstrated itself to be a tougher nut than the Taliban, and Syrian regime

forces are already thoroughly intermingled with the population and the opposition in several dozen fights all across the country. This would likely hamstring the ability of American air forces to discretely target them and inflict serious harm.

Because of the limits of this style of warfare, the United States never even tried to employ it in Iraq despite calls to arm Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC) and send them against Saddam's divisions with American air cover. The Clinton and Bush administrations recognized that the INC simply lacked the political unity and military capacity to take on Saddam's forces.

When the United States and NATO opted to employ this strategy against Qadhafi's regime in Libya, the rationale lay not in the strength of the opposition but in the military demography/topography and the weakness of the remnants of the Libyan armed forces. In Libya, as in Afghanistan, the opposition and re-

forces ever did. Israeli soldiers and officers repeatedly found that while the Syrians were not terribly agile opponents, they were extremely tenacious even when their situation was hopeless.

For all these reasons, making this strategy work could be considerably more challenging than it was either in Afghanistan or Libya. The FSA is not a capable military force and will take months or even years to become one. The Syrian military, and particularly its heavily Alawi regime protection units like the 4th Armored Division and Republican Guard, should be expected to fight somewhat better and certainly much harder than Qadhafi's forces and would get assistance from at least Iran. Moreover, although American and/or Western air forces can doubtless inflict tremendous harm to Syria's military infrastructure, as they did to the Serbian armed forces, they may be unable to cause rapid damage to the regime's combat formations both because of the difficult terrain of much of Syria and because these units are already locked in combat in

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gime forces were geographically divided; the regime held the west (other than the clearly-delineated town of Misrata) and the opposition the east. Combat was conducted primarily along the single road that traces Libya's northern coastline, where Qadhafi's forces were exposed in the open desert and could be physically prevented from getting in among the populace. In many ways, this made it the ideal set of circumstances for air power to take on ground forces. And Libya's ground forces were among the worst and weakest on earth, having been routed by Egyptians, Tanzanians, and Chadians in prior decades. Again, in Syria, Asad's armed forces are already heavily engaged with the population and opposition all across the country, which will make it considerably more difficult to go after them from the air. While the Syrian armed forces are weak relative to those of the United States or Israel, they have demonstrated considerably greater competence and cohesion than Qadhafi's

population centers across the country.

A key requirement for this option would be bases in the region. The U.S. Navy typically only has three aircraft carriers available for sustained operations at sea at any time. Given the need to keep a carrier in the Persian Gulf to watch Iran and another near East Asia, Washington would likely prefer to commit only one, or at most two, carriers to a Syrian intervention. The U.S. could also fly heavy bombers from the United States to help out, but even the combination of long-range bombers and one to two aircraft carriers would likely be inadequate for the requirements of this kind of operation. In order to be able to provide round-the-clock and across-the-country support to the FSA and be able to meet any regime counterattack quickly, the United States would need a significant number of shorter-range strike aircraft on hand and overhead at all times, and that would mean air bases for U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers nearby. In

theory, American planes could fly from NATO bases in Greece, the Balkans, or even Italy, but it would be far, far better to have them nearer. Since Israel and Iraq are both out of the question for diplomatic reasons, that again means Jordan and Turkey. And while the United States, for political and operational reasons, would want to convince both countries to provide those bases—and possibly even participate themselves—Turkey’s refusal to support the American invasion of Iraq should make clear that their acquiescence cannot be taken for granted.

This is not to say that the option cannot work. America’s navy and air forces can bring terrifying power to bear against what is ultimately a third-rate military. But neither should success be taken for granted, and making it work could require far greater effort than was expended in Libya. The United States might start with this approach only to find that it is not working and then have to face the unpalatable choice of either folding or doubling down to a ground invasion.

OPTION FIVE **TAKING THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS:** **REGIME CHANGE BY INVASION**

No one currently is advocating an invasion of Syria, the four authors of this memo included. Nor are any leading voices in the Syrian opposition calling for liberation by foreign invasion. Nevertheless, the United States could be pushed to at least consider this option under some circumstances, and its feasibility should condition American thinking about other approaches. Moreover, if the United States is absolutely determined to stop the slaughter of innocent civilians in Syria and/or overthrow the Alawi regime, an invasion may well be the only way to do so—it is certainly the only way that would be guaranteed to do so. Second, more limited forms of intervention may fail, and in failing, confront Washington with the Hobson’s choice of invasion or defeat.

There are at least four pieces of “good news” when it comes to contemplating an American-led invasion of Syria. First, as in Iraq, the initial invasion is likely to be easy. In fact, it would probably be even easier than it was in Iraq because the Syrian military is smaller,

weaker, and less-experienced than was the Iraqi military, and it is already tied down fighting an internal opposition. Second, the United States would probably do a better job of handling the essential post-war reconstruction because it has learned from the many mistakes it made in Iraq. What’s more, after Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has a large cadre of personnel with the skills needed to handle the challenges of reconstruction. Third, while the Asads were brutal dictators, they were not genocidal, totalitarian Stalinists like Saddam, and so Syrian society has not been traumatized to quite the same extent that Iraq’s was. Finally, because the Obama administration is not likely to invade Syria without strong international support (and, indeed, would probably prefer to have allies take the lead), other nations would approach any invasion very differently from the way that they saw the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Washington might be able to count on considerably greater help.

There are many potential drawbacks for the United States to an invasion of Syria, but in the shadow of Iraq and Afghanistan, there is one that towers above all the rest: post-conflict reconstruction. As in those two earlier wars, the United States would not be able to kick in the door, oust the regime, and then walk away. It would have to lead a massive effort to rebuild the country. If it did not do so, Syria would become a failed state and the battleground of a civil war. Like Iraq, Syria is an ethno-sectarian mosaic in which the majority (in Syria’s case, Sunnis) deeply resent the oppression they suffered at the hands of the Alawi minority. The country has a paltry democratic tradition and under Asad has largely been decapitated, as Iraq’s was, so that there is no well-known, legitimate, indigenous leadership that represents all Syrian communities and regions. Nor has the opposition effectively unified as Asad’s control has slipped in the last year. Thus, absent a long-term occupation and large-scale reconstruction, Syria would quickly become Iraq of 2006.

Thus, the greatest issue in deciding whether to launch an invasion is deciding whether Syria should warrant the resources and American lives such an operation would cost. An invasion of Syria should not cost nearly as much as the invasion and occupation of Iraq, but it would still be an expensive undertaking,

partly because Syria does not have Iraq's oil wealth—which did defray at least part of the costs of the Iraq war. An invasion and the early months of an occupation would require 200,000 to 300,000 troops to be done properly. That alone should put the bill for a Syrian invasion at around \$200 to \$300 billion per year for as long as that number of troops would have to remain. Again, if the United States has learned the lessons of Iraq, those troop numbers could be reduced fairly quickly, perhaps in a matter of months, though lesser numbers of troops would have to remain for years. With Democrats and Republicans fighting over every last cent in the budget, this big bill could have political costs. Also, the United States should recognize that things may not go well during the initial occupation and would have to be prepared to keep larger numbers of troops there if they go poorly. And on top of all that, the United States would have to expect to contribute at least some to the tens of billions (perhaps even hundreds of billions) of dollars needed to rebuild the Syrian economy and civilian infrastructure, although it might be possible to secure greater financial assistance from the wealthy Gulf states for Syria than was the case with Iraq.

Syria's intrinsic importance to the United States is debatable, but its location greatly increases its impact on the United States' vital interests in the region. Syria is smaller than Iraq and it lacks the oil reserves that make Iraq so important to the global economy. But it is an ally of Iran and does border Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq—all countries where the United States has strong or even vital interests. Even if Washington reasoned that Syria is not intrinsically important enough to justify the kind of rebuilding effort the United States made in Iraq, allowing it to slide into chaos and civil war would have profoundly destabilizing effects on its neighbors. Iraq is already teetering on the brink of civil war and does not need a push from chaos next door. Jordan and Lebanon are both fragile states trying to find their way to a new political balance and a failed state in Syria could swamp both of them. Civil war in Syria could cripple Turkey's political and economic emergence, and present Israel with new security nightmares. Indeed, all of these potential problems are among the most compelling rationales for the United States to intervene in

Syria and prevent its descent into civil war in the first place. If the United States invades the country to end its slide into chaos and civil war, it cannot then walk away and leave it in that very state.

The invasion and occupation of Syria would once again stretch America's military manpower. It might be necessary to draw down forces far more quickly from Afghanistan to free up Marine and army units for Syria. It would almost certainly be necessary to call up large numbers of reservists once again. All of this would add considerable stress to the lives of a great many American soldiers and Marines and their families, all of whom have already borne a great deal on behalf of our country over the past decade.

As a final note, for this policy to succeed, it would be critical to be able to mount such an invasion from Jordan and/or Turkey, whose infrastructure, topography, and locations make them far better suited than Iraq or Lebanon (Israel is not an option for obvious diplomatic reasons). Moreover, the more Arab states that could be convinced to join in, the better—both because this would make it easier for Jordan and Turkey to participate and because it would make the entire operation far more palatable both within the Middle East and beyond. It would also be ideal, although not essential, to have contributions from a wide range of European and East Asian states both for the value of their help in and of itself, and because a larger coalition would burnish the legitimacy of the enterprise. For now, none of these states are eager to support an invasion.

OPTION SIX INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION: THE GOLDILOCKS SOLUTION?

One variant on the invasion option that bears separate consideration because it could prove to be an attractive alternative is for NATO to invade Syria with Arab League diplomatic support and ideally some Arab military participation. UN authorization would be desirable, but given Russian opposition would probably not be forthcoming. Invading forces would depose the Asad regime, impose a ceasefire on the warring parties, and provide security for a long-

term, international effort to rebuild Syria. The closest model here would be the NATO intervention in Bosnia in 1995—although it would differ in at least one critical respect since there would be no Dayton Peace Accords to precede it.

In a nutshell, NATO would have to agree to mount the invasion and then provide the military means to enforce the peace and protect a UN-led multilateral effort to rebuild the country. A key consideration would have to be that the UN would lead the kind of reconciliation talks between Sunni and Alawi in Syria that never occurred in Iraq. Likewise, NATO forces would have to remain for as long as necessary, even if in diminishing numbers, to ensure the Alawis and Syria's other minorities that they would not be oppressed by the majority Sunni community (again, as NATO did in Bosnia, but the United States did not do for long enough in Iraq). In essence, NATO would depose the Alawis and other minorities and then work to protect them from a possibly vengeful majority.

Four conditions would have to be met for this model to be workable:

1. *Turkey would have to be willing to provide the logistical base and much of the ground troops for the operation.* Turkey is best placed of any country to intervene in Syria: it has a large, reasonably capable military; it has vital interests in Syria; and its interest is in seeing peace and democratic transition. However, this condition may pose difficulties because the Alawis do not trust the Sunni Turks, and Ankara might like to see a Muslim Brotherhood-led government take power in Syria. Turkey would also be reluctant to spearhead an invasion because it would not want to significantly change Syria's Kurds' status, fearing unrest in Turkey itself. Of equal or greater importance, the long-term occupation and reconstruction of Syria would likely be well beyond Turkish resources alone. Thus, while Turkey would need to be a key player—perhaps the key player, as Australia was in the similar intervention in East Timor—it cannot

be the only player; it will need financial help and multilateral assistance and cover.

2. *The Europeans and the Gulf Arabs have to be willing to pick up much of the tab.* As noted above, rebuilding Syria after the events of 2011 and an invasion and occupation will be a major undertaking. Even if the reconstruction of Syria benefits from all the lessons learned in Iraq and suffers from none of its mistakes, it will still be enormously costly and well beyond Turkey's means. Consequently, even though Turkey would be needed to put up much of the raw military muscle, it would be a mistake to ask them to shoulder the costs of that burden.
3. *The United States will have to be willing to provide critical logistical, command and control, and some combat components.* As always, there are certain things, particularly leadership, strategic direction, mobility assets, and certain precision strike capabilities that only the U.S. armed forces know how to provide and that if Washington is not willing to offer, the operation would likely falter. Along similar lines, if the United States does not furnish some ground forces, no one else will either, and American troops may be critical to reassure the Syrians that the Turks will not run amuck—something they will fear regardless of whether it is a reasonable concern. In addition, as noted, because of the United States' experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are a lot of Americans with useful skills who can contribute to pacification and reconstruction in Syria.
4. *The operation must be conducted under a multilateral—if not international framework.* NATO participation (as in Libya, Bosnia, and Kosovo) is essential because it creates the appropriate framework both for Turkish intervention and for Western assistance alongside Turkey. Arab League participation would be extremely helpful both as a source of additional (Arabic-speaking) ground troops and

to legitimize the invasion in the eyes of both the Syrian people and the wider region. Ideally, the UN Security Council would authorize the mission, or at least provide a special representative of the secretary-general to internationalize the reconstruction effort, bringing in scores of other countries and non-governmental organizations that have resources and skills that will be sorely needed for that effort.

If the United States is willing and able to secure these various conditions, the international intervention approach has numerous benefits. Of greatest importance, it would cost the United States much, much less than mounting an invasion itself, but would have far, far greater certainty of achieving American goals than any of the other options. However, securing any of these four conditions could prove impossible. The Russians have shown every sign that they would fight tooth and nail to prevent any UN mandate for such an operation. It is also not clear that the Turks are ready to make so large a commitment (although the worse things get in Syria, the more likely they probably would be since their own list of options looks even less appealing than our own). Western Europe and the United States are mired in severe economic difficulties, and the only time that the Arab states were willing to pick up the tab for a major Western military operation in the Middle East was the 1991 Gulf War. Thus, as attractive as this option might be, it will ultimately prove very hard to implement.

CONCLUSION

No option for U.S. policy for Syria is simple or cost-free. All are flawed, some quite deeply. A number of the easiest options to implement, such as diplomacy and coercing regime change, also are the most likely to fail or succeed incompletely. Others, like having opposition forces act alone or with U.S. support, might put more pressure on Asad but are potentially costly and by no means guaranteed of success. For now, some options—particularly an American invasion—are not in the cards politically in the United States and are not being called for by Syrians, regardless of their (debatable) desirability.

Recognizing a range of options is vital, however, because in practice many of the options slip easily into one another and, indeed, policymakers are likely to mix components of each. The diplomatic approach, for example, could bolster all of the other options: the United States will want to build coalitions, try to flip the Russians, and otherwise use its diplomatic power if it is trying to coerce or use force to get Asad out. Similarly, all the military options would be enhanced if the United States also continued economic pressure on the Asad regime. Such mixes may mitigate some of the problems described with each option above, yet trying to mix and match aspects of different options will often bring on new sets of costs and disadvantages.

Some of the options can be considered steps on an escalation ladder—some should be tried because they are less costly than more aggressive measures, and others should be pursued because they will be a component of a broader effort.

Several steps are vital for almost any conceivable effort to oust Asad. The United States will want to build within the “Friends of Syria” a smaller contact group, regardless of which approach is taken. Indeed, should Asad *not* fall, this group would also be vital for containing the spillover from a Syrian civil war. In addition, the United States will want to expand ties to the Syrian opposition and try to push them to be more cohesive. A stronger opposition will not only bolster the policy options, it will be critical to the shared goal of all the options. It is the opposition that will play a greater role even if there is only limited regime change, and of course would be the government of Syria should Asad and his henchman fall completely.

Finally, U.S. regional allies, particularly Turkey, are vital. They will play a major role in determining how tight sanctions are and the degree of isolation felt by the regime. Because of their proximity to Syria, they are also essential to various military options, even if they themselves do not take the lead.

Policymakers should recognize, however, that diplomacy and coercion alone may not topple Asad. The

options in this paper offer alternatives for escalation and, at the same time, reasons that escalation would be costly and risky. In the end, policymakers may decide that the price for removing Assad is too high and the consequences for Syria's long-term stability too uncertain. If so, they must focus on the problem of a weakened but defiant Assad who is also more dependent on Iran. This would require thinking through how to structure sanctions on Syria and regional diplomacy to limit the humanitarian impact on the Syrian people while still maintaining pressure on the Syrian regime.

Whether Assad stays or falls, the civil war in Syria may spill over into neighboring states, which requires efforts to shore them up and try to reduce the scale and

scope of the civil conflict. So even as the United States pursues regime change, it must also work to bolster neighboring states to care for refugees, prevent terrorism, and refrain from self-defeating interventions.

As a final thought, it is always important to keep in mind that failing to act—even failing to decide—is an action and a decision. Not choosing to intervene is the same as choosing not to intervene, and it would be far better that whatever course the United States follows, that it be the product of a conscious decision so that we can pursue it properly, rather than the outcome of a paralyzing indecision that prevents Washington from doing anything to protect this country's many interests affected by the bloodshed of Syria.

ENDNOTES

¹ On the effects of spillover and their ability to cause potentially very harmful effects on neighboring states, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), pp. 17–59.

² “UN Relief Chief and Joint Special Envoy Annan to Visit Syria this Week,” UN News Centre, March 5, 2012.

³ As this paper focuses on options designed to bring about Assad's removal, not just mitigate the humanitarian consequences of the current strife, it does not address the military requirements of safe havens or humanitarian corridors in any detail.

⁴ Nada Bakri, “Sanctions Pose Growing Threat to Syria's Assad,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2011.

⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Obama to Iran and Israel: ‘As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,’” *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.

⁶ Joby Warrick and Liz Sly, “U.S. Officials: Iran is Stepping Up Lethal Aid to Syria,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2012.

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