

## After Assad: A Host of Challenges

Written by Wayne E. White

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WAYNE E. WHITE, AUG 8 2012

Recent events suggest the battle between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition could be approaching a climax. The rebels have taken a pounding in the capital of Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's other large city, but their staying power in both (as well as their recent assassination of four key security officials within President Bashar al-Assad's inner circle in Damascus) demonstrates mounting capabilities. By contrast, though the Syrian military remains formidable, the strength of the most reliable army units, so long at the forefront of the defense of the regime, undoubtedly has been degraded by combat casualties, desertion, and wear and tear affecting valuable military hardware. Bashar's declaration last week to his forces in Aleppo that they are engaged in a battle that could decide the fate of Syria smacks of greater desperation.

The outcome of the bloody struggle for Syria is not yet clear, but certainly it is time to consider the likely impact of the potential demise of the Assad regime. Despite overwhelming international support for the regime's removal, many countries supporting the opposition (including leading powers like the United States, as well as most states in the Middle East), are profoundly worried about the ramifications of regime collapse. They have reason to be concerned.

All likely consequences and related scenarios stem from the potential fallout inside Syria itself. The aftermath of the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi in Libya last year (which also involved a prolonged period of violent combat between regime forces and armed elements of the opposition) is instructive. Although Libya has held its first elections, central government authority has been compromised as much of the country remains in control of competing local and tribal factions, with occasional clashes among them. A somewhat similar, but quite possibly even more divisive (and bloody) fate could await post-Assad Syria.

Syria under the Assad's has been dominated to a great extent by members of Islam's Shi'ite-related Alawite (or Alawi) sect from which the Assad's hail. For over 40 years of rule, the Assad family has leaned heavily on this minority in order to fill tens of thousands of valuable military, security and government positions with regime loyalists. Alawites also dominate the "Shabiha," thuggish, localized civilian militias of sorts, which have been employed during the current uprising to conduct widespread, brutal crackdowns against mainly Sunni Muslim pro-opposition population centers. Yet, Alawites are believed to comprise only 10-12% of the overall Syrian population, most of which adheres to Islam's more mainstream Sunni faith. If the Sunni-Alawite rift were not enough, much of Syria's sizeable Christian minority (estimated to be around 10% of the populace) has remained at least passively loyal to the regime.

Consequently, should the regime collapse, the predominantly Sunni fighters associated with the Syrian opposition almost certainly would be involved in reprisals against Alawites, especially those with real or suspected past ties to the Assad regime. Only the extent of such violence remains in doubt—particularly the ability of a successor government to bring such revenge-taking under control in response to the inevitable international outcry. Overall, this phenomenon might well resemble mistreatment of the Sunni Arab minority in Iraq that comprised much of President Saddam Hussein's power base by Iraq's recently empowered Shi'a Muslim majority (as well as violence on the part of Iraqi Sunni Arab extremists against the Shi'a, in part for stripping them of their former leadership role). Clearly, Syrian Christians also could be on the receiving end of some measure of violence and discrimination in the wake of the regime's fall.

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Another adverse post-Assad impact could be infighting among different rebel factions. There already have been a few such incidents amidst the ongoing rebellion, especially involving militant Sunni Muslims versus fighters with more mainstream Sunni beliefs as well as otherwise pro-opposition civilians protesting the enforcement of harsh religious restrictions within their towns or urban neighborhoods by Sunni militants. Disunity revolving around the role of Sunni militants in the rebellion overall also has been reflected in much of the disagreement and friction among various factions represented in the opposition's Syrian National Council based in Turkey.

Both sectarian and intra-opposition violence and tensions could undermine stability in Syria for quite some time after the fall of the Assad regime. This in particular is perhaps of the most concern to Syria's various neighbors—and much of the broader international community.

Turkey and Jordan already have been impacted by a substantial flow of Syrian refugees fleeing the fighting. As the violence becomes more intense, the humanitarian burden on these two neighbors is likely to increase further. And should Syria remain unstable after an overthrow of the Assad regime, sectarian violence especially could send large numbers of Syrian Alawites and Christians into Turkey, Jordan, as well as Lebanon to the West. And, as with increased Iraqi Kurdish autonomy since 2003, Turkey is concerned that the possibility of more rights for Syria's small Kurdish ethnic minority in a post-Assad scenario might stir restless elements among Turkey's far larger Kurdish population just to the north.

Another serious concern for both Israel as well as the international community is Syria's large arsenal of chemical weapons (CW). Already regime forces have moved some of them, either for better protection from the opposition forces or to prepare for their possible use against rebel targets. Should the opposition, which contains some Islamic extremist elements, get hold of such weapons before or following a fall of the regime, some could make their way into the hands of extremist terrorists beyond Syria's border. Moreover, an Assad regime in its death throes, out of sheer spite, might provide some CW to ally Iran or elements of the Shi'ite Muslim Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, which has received quite a lot of support from both the Syria regime and Iran. In part, because of Israel's fear of this possible scenario, Israel and the U.S. have been working urgently to upgrade Israeli anti-missile defenses (part of Syria's CW weaponry is in the form of missile warheads).

Additionally, Israel fears that a new, potentially more militant Sunni Muslim-dominated government in Syria might not honor the longstanding Syrian ceasefire with Israel as carefully as has the Assad regime. Along the Golan Heights, and despite its refusal to make peace with Israel, the Syrian regime has consistently adhered to the UN-supervised ceasefire arrangement since it was brokered by the U.S. in 1974-1975. Yet, the Syrian military is—and would remain under any new opposition government—without the ability to avoid a humiliating defeat should hostilities with Israel result from a disruption of the nearly 40-year truce, and this stark reality is a critical factor that hopefully would play a central role in the course chosen by Assad's successors toward this important issue.

Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki fears the fall of the Assad's because his Iranian-leaning regime would not wish to see a Sunni regime emerge in Syria that could look unfavorably upon his Shiite-dominated government (one of the very few in the region not to join other Arab states in calling for Assad & Co. to step down). In fact, worse still, such a Syrian regime might look the other way as Syrian Sunnis provided increased aid to their beleaguered Iraqi co-religionists across the border.

By contrast, on the plus side of the ledger for Israel and the many Sunni Arab states aligned against Iran, would be the end of the last unabashedly Iranian-allied government in the region. Moreover, since most of the arms and other supplies bound for Lebanon's pro-Iranian Hezbollah militia have come via Damascus International Airport, any new Syrian regime probably would sever this Iranian-Hezbollah pipeline, weakening Hezbollah militarily over time. Finally, there might well be greater official Syrian sympathy for Lebanon's Sunni minority and considerably less for its majority Shiite community (which is far closer to Syria's Alawites). The militantly anti-Israeli Hezbollah draws its strength from that community, and both have gained considerable advantage from Syria under the Assad's during and since the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War that reshuffled and destabilized that nation's political landscape.

For the U.S. and the West, prospective relations with a post-Assad Syria remain somewhat uncertain. To the extent

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Islamic militants were to play a role in such a new order, they would likely be characteristically suspicious of the predominantly Christian and secular West, and deeply resentful of American and other Western support for Israel. All Syrian rebel factions could remain disappointed—perhaps even angry—over the international community's failure to intervene militarily to cut short the Assad regime's avalanche of violence against them. Likewise, the blockage at the UN of more forceful international measures against the Assad government by Russia and China could very well cast Syria's previous allies, especially Moscow, in an equally iffy – or considerably worse – light.

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**Wayne E. White** *has been serving as a Scholar at Washington's Middle East Institute since retiring from government service in 2005.*

**Author's note:** *Extensive, courageous, coverage of the current struggle for Syria by the international media, Syrian participants themselves, and other leading experts has provided a rich base of information from which to formulate this analysis. 26 years covering Middle East developments in various capacities (including Senior Analyst for Syria) from inside the US Intelligence Community with the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence & Research has been invaluable in providing otherwise unobtainable access to sensitive information and perspectives on issues like this one with which to assess the situation.*

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