



Syria: A Clear Path

Policy Options to Resolve the Crisis in view of U.S. Interests

ABOUT THE SYRIAN AMERICAN COUNCIL

Founded in 2005 in Burr Ridge Illinois, , the Syrian American Council (SAC) is a nonprofit organization based in the United States, and is the largest and oldest grassroots organization of Syrian-Americans. With 21 chapters nationwide, SAC devotes itself to community organizing, awareness-raising, youth empowerment, media outreach, advocacy, and support for Syrians seeking to build a free, democratic, and pluralistic Syria. It serves to amplify the voice of the Syrian-American community. Its membership includes individuals from all segments of Syrian society. SAC is a founding member of the Coalition for a Democratic Syria.

ABOUT THE COALITION FOR A DEMOCRATIC SYRIA

The Coalition for a Democratic Syria is a group of Syrian-American non-profit organizations working together to bring about a swift end to the conflict and support the establishment of peace, freedom, and democracy in Syria. CDS is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, non-partisan organization. It includes: Syrian American Council, Syrian Emergency Task Force, United for Free Syria, Syrian Expatriates Organization, Syrian American Alliance, Syrian Christians for Democracy, and Association of Free Syrians.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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FOREWORD

Syria: A Clear Path—Policy Options to Resolve the Crisis in View of U.S. Interests is an ongoing project of the Syrian American Council (SAC) intended to inform U.S. foreign policy decision-makers of the background and nuances of the Syrian Revolution, the political and military landscape in Syria, and the impact and perception of current American policies. The paper outlines substantive policy recommendations drawn from its authors' deep knowledge of the Syrian Crisis. Mohamed Alaa Ghanem in particular lived in Syria for 28 years and has since made multiple trips to the region to consult with key revolutionary figures in Syria, and to keep in constant communication with contacts at all levels of the Syrian opposition. During the writing of this paper, its authors consulted with members of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereafter "the Coalition"), the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Local Administrative Councils (LACs), Syrian relief NGOs, and other prominent revolutionary figures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Bassel Korkor, a member of the Syrian American Council, board member of United For a Free Syria (UFS) and the Coalition for a Democratic Syria, and Legal Advisor to the Coalition; Shlomo Bolts, of the Syrian Expatriates Organization (SEO); Joel Bombardier, of the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF); Sohib al-Agha, head of SACs Government Relations Committee and national board member; Leila Hilal, Director of the Middle East Task Force at the New America Foundation; Ambassador Frederic Hof; and the many opposition figures who took the time to speak or correspond with the authors.

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Executive Summary

The crisis in Syria is rapidly accelerating. The United States and much of the international community have tried for two years to help Syrians achieve a negotiated solution to bring a peaceful end to the crisis with no success. Assad has repeatedly refused to negotiate because, in the words of former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Israel Edward Djerejian, Assad has “a sense of delusion that he can somehow prevail and win.”¹

Because of Assad’s delusions, pressure is required to force members of his regime to see that military victory is impossible, and that the end is fast approaching. Properly applied pressure will increase defections and force Assad and the members of his inner circle to hold real negotiations.

While Assad continues refusing to negotiate, civilians in the liberated areas of Syria are desperately short on resources needed to govern and to supply their communities with critical goods and services. This dynamic has created desperate needs that are increasingly being met by hardline organizations. Given this lack of resources, support from the U.S. will help these organic civilian structures fill the political vacuum, marginalize extremists, create stability, and increase U.S. prospects of forging strategic relationships with Syria’s future leaders.

U.S. Interests for Syria

- Prevent Syria from turning into a failed state and a potential base for extremists.
- Produce a managed transition to a stable, civilian-led democracy in Syria.
- Protect vital U.S. national security interests in the Levant and throughout the broader Middle East.
- Deprive Iran of its staunchest ally, cut its lifeline to Hezbollah, and prevent the terrorist organization from using the chaos to expand its weapons stockpiles.
- Seize an historic opportunity to help Syria become a force for stability in the Middle East by building new strategic relationships with the Syrian people as they strive for freedom and democracy in their homeland.
- Save lives and stem the destabilizing exodus of refugees by ending a conflict that has created a humanitarian disaster of immense proportions.
- Secure Syria’s stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons.
- Contain the conflict’s spillover, prevent further regional instability, and defend the integrity of America’s allies.

This brief outlines policy changes that will allow the U.S. to help steer the conflict toward a positive resolution without being drawn into an over-extended commitment. The U.S. can facilitate this outcome by empowering civilian governance from the bottom-up and from the top-down, and by increasing the political and military pressure on the Assad regime.

A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

The U.S. should empower civilian governance from the bottom-up, by supporting the organic efforts of Local Administrative Councils (LACs), and from the top down, by supporting the Coalition and its interim government. This support must include:

1. Building on the diplomatic successes of Doha and Marrakech to help the Coalition and its interim technocratic government to become a credible alternative government established on Syrian soil.
2. Granting the Coalition full recognition as soon as possible, as many of America's allies have already done.
3. Helping the Coalition obtain the resources necessary to govern, including providing financial, humanitarian, and technical assistance and spearheading a diplomatic effort to turn over frozen assets to the Coalition so that these funds can be used to help administer the liberated areas and rebuild Syria.
4. Use the Coalition to deliver two kinds of aid:
 - a. First, reapportion non-lethal aid so it is distributed primarily through the Coalition. Aid distributed in this manner will help the Coalition and its provincial councils increase their capacity, legitimacy, and effectiveness as a future government.
 - b. Second, use the Coalition, its Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), its interim government, the provincial councils, as well as NGOs operating in northern Syria to deliver humanitarian aid. Doing so will:
 - i. Allow aid to more efficiently reach those in greatest need
 - ii. Further support the Coalition as a national institution
 - iii. Alter the negative perception of America's role in the eyes of the Syrian people.
5. Supporting the Coalition in the international arena, including formal recognition and support in its bid for Syria's seat at the United Nations.
6. Coordinating military aid to the Supreme Military Command (SMC) through the Coalition to ensure armed actors submit to civilian rule and help the SMC increase its leverage over military groups on the ground.

The U.S. should help increase the political pressure on Assad by:

1. Cutting off all diplomatic relations, thereby sending a clear message to Assad and the members of his regime that he has no place in a future Syria; a message which will encourage key defections and increase the likelihood of real negotiations.
2. Supporting the Coalition and its interim government to become a credible alternative government established on Syrian soil.
3. Working with allies to choke off the flow of money, arms, and other resources to Assad.

The U.S. should help increase the military pressure on Assad by:

1. Working with and supporting the SMC so that it can unify the disparate fighting groups by becoming the primary source of logistical support for revolutionary forces. This support will also help it shoulder out extremist militant groups.
2. Eliminating the Assad regime's ability to terrorize the liberated areas of Syria from above, either by providing or permitting the provision of anti-aircraft weapons to vetted elements of the armed opposition, or by using U.S. and NATO assets to shield the liberated areas. Either approach should be complemented with training and intelligence sharing.
3. Increasing the flow of supplies to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in southern Syria, through cooperation with Jordan, thereby exerting bidirectional military pressure on Assad.

Why Inaction is Untenable:

- The rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation threatens to destabilize the Middle East, without mentioning its staggering cost in terms of lives ended or uprooted by the conflict.
- Permitting Assad to endure strengthens Iran and Hezbollah, while defeating Assad will deal them both a severe blow.
- Allowing Syria to continue down the path to state failure, risks the country becoming a base for extremists and a launching pad for attacks against U.S. allies and assets throughout the region.
- America's allies increasing frustration with U.S. inaction risks straining strategic relationships with them and prevents the U.S. from building similar relationships with the future leaders of Syria.
- A negotiated political settlement is ideal, but Assad has rejected multiple offers. Insufficient or weak action by the U.S. and the international community will not pressure him to change his calculation.
- The most likely outcomes of an unassisted Syrian revolution will likely produce continuing violence, regional instability, and elevated security threats to the U.S. and its regional allies.
- Any conceivable outcome of an unaided revolution will produce a Syria indifferent or even hostile to U.S. interests, rather than a key geostrategic partner grateful a helping hand extended in its time of need.

Why Inaction is Untenable

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ASSAD REGIME

The Assad regime has a long history of harsh, authoritarian rule. Neither Bashar al-Assad, nor his father Hafiz al-Assad tolerated any dissent or held any real negotiations with their political opposition. The current members of the ruling family learned from the “successes” of Hafiz al-Assad that power was best maintained by banning dissent and violently crushing all opposition.

In 1963, the Baath Socialist Party, led by members of the military including a young air force commander named Hafiz al-Assad, seized power in Syria in a military coup d'état. The Baath regime enacted an emergency law that the country languished under for almost half a century. The law suspended most basic civil rights, including the right to free assembly and association, preventing the development of Syrian civil society. This suspension of constitutional rights and the consequent stagnation of political life and free debate would have ramifications for the organization of Syria's political opposition half a century later. Simply put, there was no organized political opposition to the Assad regime before the revolution began.

In two coups in 1969 and 1970, then Defense Minister Hafiz al-Assad consolidated his power, finally assuming the presidency of Syria in 1971. Assad, an Alawite, then ruled predominantly Sunni Muslim Syria with an iron fist until his death in 2000. He eliminated political dissenters by arrest, torture, and execution. His regime plundered the country's resources and reserved key posts in the state and military for members of his minority sect. This expansion of the bureaucracy also created a substantial class loyal to the regime.

Assad's son, Bashar, inherited the police state upon his father's death in 2000. The old constitution that stipulated that the president be no younger than forty years of age was changed in twenty four hours to allow the then 34-year old to assume the presidency. Bashar put up a reformist act but followed closely in the footsteps of his father. Before the revolution, a small, corrupt elite, particularly the Assad family, kept a tenacious grip on Syria through a total monopoly of power.

THE GROWING HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF THE CRISIS

Syria's revolution began on March 15, 2011 as a nonviolent protest movement in favor of democracy and respect for basic political and civil rights. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad responded to the Syrian people's reasonable requests for reform with the most brutal crackdown against a pro-democracy uprising anywhere in the Middle East. Since then, the conflict has escalated to a humanitarian crisis of disastrous proportions. Panos Moutziz, regional coordinator for Syria at the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency said, “this is the fastest-deteriorating humanitarian crisis on the planet...and it is deteriorating at a much, much faster pace than we had planned for. It's dramatic, it's explosive, and it's dangerous.”²

Death toll

Violence persists in Syria, and has increased in intensity through early 2013. Estimates by activist organizations put the daily death toll between 150 and 200 people. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said 6,000 people were killed in Syria in March of 2013, making it the deadliest month of the crisis to date.³ Conservative UN estimates place the minimum number of those killed in Syria as of February 2013 around 70,000.⁴ In April 2013, the head of the SOHR estimated that the total number of people killed in the crisis may already exceed 120,000.⁵

Refugees

The numbers of refugees and those internally displaced within Syria are also staggering. Over 1.3 million people have registered or are waiting to register as refugees, mostly in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.⁶ On average, 7-8,000 Syrians are fleeing the country every day.⁷ Some days, as many as 14,000 flee Syria.⁸ Host countries put the actual refugee numbers much higher than the UNHCR's totals, as many refugees are being hosted in people's homes or are reluctant to register.

Late last year, the U.N predicted that the number of refugees would double to 1.1 million, and might rise as high as 1.8 million, by June of this year if the conflict is not ended.⁹ On March 19, however, High Commissioner Guterres said "the situation has deteriorated so quickly in recent months that we reached this number already in mid-March. If no political solution to the conflict is found soon, the refugee number could double or even triple by the end of the year."¹⁰ The High Commissioner added that, if the present rate of refugee outflows continues, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey will each host 1 million refugees by the end of 2013.¹¹ These dramatically increasing casualty and refugee figures indicate the crisis is rapidly accelerating.

Refugees are not the only people who urgently need assistance and an end to the violence. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the implementing partner through whom the UN delivers much of its humanitarian aid, has estimated that 4 million people have been displaced within Syria, and nearly half of them are not getting enough help.¹² In total, the UN estimates that over one in five Syrians are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, and more than 3 million are in need of food.¹³ Additionally, activists estimate that another 200,000 remain detained for political activism related to the revolution, and that about 60,000 have been forcibly disappeared for similar activities.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Assad regime's security apparatus has created a wanted list of 100,000 additional individuals, including women and children as young as 14.¹⁵

AMERICAN GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS IN SYRIA

Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria

The humanitarian crisis in Syria will have dire geopolitical consequences if the U.S. fails to act. Additionally, the U.S. stands to make significant geopolitical gains if it can help bring about a peaceful and stable post-Assad Syria. Defeating Assad would be a significant blow to Iran and its proxy terrorist ally Hezbollah.

Both Iran and Hezbollah are actively involved on the ground in Syria. Iran is providing military, economic, and propaganda support to the regime.¹⁶ They have sent forces to fight beside the Syrian army, and Iran is “training and equipping the Jaysh al-Shabi, a Syrian government-controlled force...modeled on the Basij militia of the Islamic Republic.”¹⁷ This combination of Shiite and Alawite militias receives weapons, money, and training from Iran. Undersecretary David Cohen, of the Treasury Department’s terrorism and financial intelligence division, was quoted in *Foreign Policy* saying “Jaysh is essentially an Iran-Hezbollah joint venture...it’s obvious that this is an important proxy group for them.”¹⁸

American Interests in Syria

1. Defeating Assad will be a severe blow to Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah.
2. Allowing Syria to become a failed state will risk the country becoming a launching pad for attacks against U.S. allies and assets throughout the region.
3. Preventing spillover and refugee exodus will ensure U.S. regional allies are not further destabilized.
4. Increasing frustration of regional allies over U.S. inaction risks straining America’s strategic relationships.

Hezbollah is continually deepening its military involvement in Syria.¹⁹ Iranian Revolutionary Guard units have been sighted in Syria in increasing numbers. Over the last year, these forces have transitioned from an advisory capacity to direct participation in combat. In fact, these “foreign Shiite militiamen have become one of Assad’s most trusted fighting units.”²⁰

CENTCOM Commander General James Mattis said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that forcing Assad from power would be “the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 25 years.”²¹ Senator John McCain, then the senior Republican on the panel, agreed with Mattis saying, “the end of the Assad regime could sever Hezbollah’s lifeline to Iran, eliminate a longstanding threat to Israel, bolster Lebanon’s sovereignty and independence, and remove a committed state sponsor of terrorism that is engaged in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It would be a geopolitical success of the first order.”²² Iran’s Supreme Leader’s advisor for international affairs Ali Akbar Velayati said in late January that Iran would consider an attack on Syria to be an attack on itself.²³ Just a week earlier, Velayati had said that Assad was a critical ally, and that his fate was a “red line” for Tehran.²⁴ Forcing Assad’s exit would deprive Iran of a key strategic ally.

However, if Assad is allowed to win, Iran and its terrorist ally Hezbollah will emerge as more powerful and intimidating forces in the Middle East. Iran has a history of exploiting chaos to create proxies in order to spread its influence. For example, Hezbollah continues to be a thorn in the side of the U.S. and its regional allies decades after Iran took advantage of the turmoil of the Lebanese civil war to create it. There is a risk that the Jaysh al-Shabi could similarly take root in Syria, given Iran’s current unrestricted capacity to operate in the country.

Risk of conflict spillover

Spillover incidents in Lebanon, and recently in Iraq, illustrate the disastrous consequences of allowing the Syrian crisis to fester. Hezbollah's actions in support of Assad, as outlined above, lead many observers to conclude that the terrorist organization's actions risk sparking a serious outbreak of violence in Lebanon that might bring the country to renewed civil war.²⁵ Incidents in Iraq in early 2013 demonstrate that the Syrian conflict is ratcheting up tension in that fragile nation and is similarly threatening to reignite violence.²⁶ The crisis in Syria has and will continue to exacerbate its neighbors' internal problems, deeply unsettling the region.²⁷ The longer the crisis in Syria is permitted to continue, the greater the risk of prolonged instability and increased regional spillover.

Risk of systemic state failure

If Assad cannot win, but is not entirely defeated and Syria is left to become a failed state, American interests and allies would be threatened by instability in the middle of a region where the U.S. has critical geostrategic and geopolitical interests. Later in this section, this paper will outline the four scenarios likely to occur in Syria without international action (p. 10). The analysis section of this paper (p. 12) will detail the manner in which the Assad regime's policies are intentionally sowing sectarian discord, militarizing society, and destroying the social fabric of Syria in ways that are likely to lead to systemic and prolonged state failure, barring international action.

A failed or enfeebled state on the borders of U.S. allies Turkey, Jordan, and Israel would provide a base of operations for attacks against these countries and American assets throughout the region. The security vacuum would allow for the proliferation of armed groups that would be a challenge for future governments to monitor or bring to heel. UN Envoy Brahimi has warned that Syria will likely become a failed state ruled by warlords without international help in finding a solution.²⁸ A failed or weak state unable to impose law and order will provide fertile ground for extremist groups and militias that will not only destroy Syria, but will also severely undermine peace and stability in the whole region for decades to come.

The inadequate international aid response

U.S. allies, especially Turkey and Jordan, are becoming frustrated with American inaction on a potentially disastrous situation with far reaching regional ramifications.²⁹ America's reluctance to act despite repeated calls from its allies will strain long-term strategic relationships in the region.

The Syria policy of America's European allies more effectively addresses the concerns of Syria's neighbors and more effectively engages the Syrian opposition. France, Great Britain, Turkey, and the Gulf states all recognized the Coalition earlier and more fully than the U.S.³⁰ Their recognition treats the Coalition as the sole legitimate government of Syria, allowing the Coalition to send ambassadors to Paris, London, and Doha. The recognition allows the French and British governments to directly fund the Local Administrative Councils (LACs) with non-lethal aid.³¹ (More information on the LACs can be found on p. 12). Full recognition also allows the Qatari government to funnel their humanitarian aid to Syria through the Coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), a hub created to centralize the distribution of humanitarian aid which has not been supported by the U.S. thus far.³²

The level of recognition currently granted to the Coalition by the U.S. lags behind America's European allies and does not currently allow either of these processes to occur. Secretary Kerry's statements during his recent trip to the Middle East indicated a symbolically important shift in policy, showing that the U.S. is finally following its European allies in supporting the Coalition with a limited amount of non-lethal aid.³³ The \$60 million in additional non-lethal aid announced by Secretary Kerry includes soon-to-expire Meals Ready to Eat and medical aid to be given directly to armed resistance.³⁴ This aid, limited in kind and amount, is a promising gesture, but definitely is not the game changer that Syria needs.

International humanitarian aid efforts

The U.S. and other international donors have pledged tremendous amounts of humanitarian aid for Syria. Humanitarian aid to the tune of more than \$1.5 billion was pledged at the January conference in Kuwait.³⁵ However, relief groups still observe that converting promises into actual funding for programs on the ground can take a long time.³⁶ As of March, the U.N. said it had only received about 20 percent of the aid pledged at the Kuwait conference.³⁷ Furthermore, this aid is not delivered through the most ideal or most efficient channels.

This humanitarian aid will be distributed through two existing U.N. channels. One of these will serve refugees in Syria's neighbors, and the other will work with NGOs on the ground inside Syria. Due to restrictions put in place by the Assad regime, coupled with international sovereignty laws restricting U.N. agencies, these organizations effectively cannot operate outside of regime-controlled areas.

The international aid agencies' ponderous humanitarian response has exacerbated the crisis. As *The Economist* observed, "this is because the UN works through the Syrian government and its authorized agencies, which tend to favor government-controlled areas."³⁸ The French medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has criticized existing distribution networks for their inability to reach the portion of the country's population living in opposition-controlled areas.³⁹

THE INADEQUATE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL RESPONSE

The U.S., the U.N., and much of the international community have tried for many months to negotiate a political solution to the conflict in Syria. If it were possible, the ideal solution in Syria would be a political one that results in a negotiated and widely accepted transfer of power from the regime to a transitional government headed by the opposition. However, current efforts are failing because the conditions on the ground are not conducive to a political solution.

The Coalition's offer of negotiations

Assad has time and again rejected calls for negotiations, both in his address delivered at the Damascus Opera House on January 6, and more recently in response to the Coalition's repeated calls for negotiations.⁴⁰

In January and February 2013, the opposition made repeated entreaties for negotiation with representatives of the regime itself. To that end, the Coalition established a framework for negotiations in their Cairo meeting in early February. They outlined several key principles which would set the framework for negotiations:⁴¹

First, The Syrian opposition is open for talks with members of the Syrian government, provided that Assad and the leaders of his security apparatus who are responsible for the crimes of the regime are excluded. Mouaz al-Khatib, head of the Syrian opposition, has suggested he is willing to talk with Assad's ceremonial deputy, Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa.⁴² Practically speaking, any future government including Assad or his henchmen would not be a real solution. It would not put an end to the conflict, but would produce continued instability and violence. Therefore, the U.S. should not accommodate Russia's insistence on including Assad in a future government.

Second, all Syrians who have not participated in crimes against their fellow Syrians must be part of the political solution, including those working in the government. This is a critical element of the plan, which ensures that Baath party members and government employees will have a place in future Syria, and that state institutions will be preserved. At a security conference in Munich, Khatib said that failing to preserve state institutions would be tantamount to treason.⁴³

Third, the political initiative must have clear objectives, and a clearly delineated timeline. These requirements will prevent the Assad regime from using the initiative to stall for time.

Fourth, the UNSC, including Russia and the U.S., must secure international support and safeguards to make the transition process possible.

Fifth—and most importantly—the Friends of Syria must recognize that a lasting political solution that ensures the stability of the region and preserves the institutions of the state will only occur once the balance of power inside Syria is changed through support for the Syrian Coalition and the SMC.

Key Components of the Coalition's Negotiation Framework

1. Negotiations must lead to a transfer of full executive authority to the opposition.
2. Members of the regime with blood on their hands cannot be part of the negotiations, but state structures must be preserved.
3. Any agreement must have clear objectives and a clearly delineated timeline.
4. A political solution can only happen once the balance of power inside Syria is changed through support for the Coalition and the SMC.

Assad's unwillingness to negotiate

Despite repeated entreaties to do so from both the Syrian opposition and U.N Envoy Brahimi, Assad has proven unwilling to negotiate. Even the offer of amnesty has not brought him to the negotiating table; early in February, a spokesman for the opposition said that the Coalition “would offer Mr. Assad the opportunity to escape prosecution, provided he [leaves] the country.”⁴⁴ Syrian state media dismissed this and Coalition leader Khatib’s recent offer as “political maneuvering” well before any official response was issued by the regime.⁴⁵ When Ali Hadiar, the regime’s minister for national reconciliation, finally gave the regime’s official response, he carefully stated that any dialogue would not “just hand power from one side to the other,” continuing a long-standing regime policy of using negotiations to stall for time.⁴⁶

Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Israel Edward Djerejian argues that Assad’s hope to regain control is delusional, and makes Assad increasingly dangerous.⁴⁷

If the Assad regime will not negotiate in the interest of peace, they must be forced to see that they cannot kill their way out of the conflict. Until Assad, or members of his regime, reach this realization, they will continue to postpone meaningful negotiations and use talks to stall for time while the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. Statements by regime officials in early 2013, perceived by some as opening the possibility of negotiations, are seen by Syrians and many analysts as simply another delaying tactic, especially considering that Assad has a history of failing to support statements made by his underlings.⁴⁸

Russia and Syria

Russia and Syria have a relationship dating back to the Cold War. Syria hosts Russia’s only naval base outside of the former Soviet Union, and Russia has supplied the Assad regime with military hardware and expertise for decades, continuing to do so even as Bashar al-Assad turned these weapons against his own people. Russia has used its seat on the U.N. Security Council to veto resolutions which would permit international action against the Assad regime, and continues to argue that Assad must be a part of any political transition in Syria.

Until the Syrian Coalition’s offer of negotiations, U.N Brahimi had hoped to use Russia’s relationship with Syria to spur negotiations. He believed that the best chance for peace was to forge consensus between the U.S. and Russia, instead of Syrian-Syrian negotiations. Brahimi said that the opposition’s offer to negotiate “opened the door and challenged the Syrian government” to show it is actually as interested in negotiating as it has said it is.⁴⁹

Brahimi continues to seek a U.S-Russia agreement, even as the Assad regime continues to reject him as a biased “false witness” to the crisis in Syria.⁵⁰ In such an agreement, the two countries would need to agree on a transitional governing mechanism, sell it to the U.N. Security Council, and then presumably present it to Assad.

Experts believe that this approach has almost no chance of working, since it effectively provides Assad with a veto option.⁵¹ U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon echoed this sentiment in a January news conference, saying he does not see “much prospect of resolution” of the conflict by diplomacy.⁵²

All efforts by the U.S. to include Russia as part of a solution to the conflict in Syria have hit a dead end. A few months ago, however, Russia admitted that Assad's days are numbered, and Russian officials made statements broadly interpreted to signify a slight decrease in support for the Assad regime.⁵³ However this does not represent a shift in Russia's long-standing position of support for Assad. Even if Russia were to reduce its support for long-time ally Bashar al-Assad, it is not clear that Russia is in a position to force Assad to negotiate.

It is clear that international diplomacy, involving the U.N. and Russia, will not be taken seriously by the regime. The regime will continue to paint Brahimi's efforts as an assault on Syrian sovereignty. Viewed realistically, until the current dynamic on the ground is changed or the U.N. Security Council can force a settlement, Assad will only use such diplomacy to buy time.

POSSIBLE POLITICAL OUTCOMES OF UNAIDED REVOLUTION

If the U.S. and the international community cannot help impose a negotiated settlement, and fail to assist the forces of the Syrian revolution in a more meaningful way, there are four possible outcomes of the conflict.⁵⁴ All of these outcomes are likely to result in varying degrees of continued instability and ongoing security concerns for American interests and allies in the region, clearly demonstrating why a policy of inaction is untenable.

Palace Coup: Where members of Assad's regime oust or kill Assad and negotiate a ceasefire. This outcome would likely produce a weak government with significant opposition, and probably would not end the conflict. This option was once seen as likely, but looks less so as the conflict drags on.

Regime Collapse: Where Assad is killed or goes into exile, and the opposition's interim government develops into a transitional government. This option would be better than a palace coup because it can potentially end the conflict, but still would require that outstanding issues resulting from the conflict's bitter legacy be resolved. Regime collapse is somewhat more likely than a palace coup, and represents the best hope to end the conflict. However, regime collapse without U.S. assistance will have serious ramifications for future U.S.-Syria relations because of prevailing Syrian public opinion of U.S. inaction during the conflict.

Prolonged Conflict: Where the current military situation continues. In this scenario, violence and sectarianism increase, neither side can claim absolute military victory, government authority and institutions collapse, and the danger of warlordism and regional spillover increases. A prolonged stalemate would make a stable transition almost impossible. Facts on the ground and current international policies make this outcome look increasingly likely.

Most Likely Outcomes of Unaided Revolution

1. Prolonged conflict (status quo). Neither side can claim victory, while violence and sectarianism worsens.
2. Fragmented state (Alawite statelet). Opposition takes control of government, but cannot govern substantial portions of the country.

The most likely outcomes will produce continuing violence, regional instability, and increased security threats to the U.S. and its allies.

Fragmented State (Alawite Statelet): Where the Alawites (and likely the Kurds) retreat into their ethnic homelands, leaving the Sunnis and other minorities in charge of a weak, Damascus-based government that cannot control substantial portions of the country. Assad, or his successor, would then only command a well-armed militia in a land of militias. This scenario would be highly unstable and would set a disastrous precedent for other states in the region. The ongoing instability produced by this scenario will create continued troubles for U.S. regional allies and interests. It appears to some that current regime policies are preparing for this eventuality as a last resort.⁵⁵

Analysis of the Complex Syrian Emergency

THE ASSAD REGIME'S STRATEGY

Assad's desperate "poison pill" strategy

Syria analysts have recently come to believe that Assad is actively avoiding meaningful negotiations because he is pursuing what Ambassador Frederic Hof calls an "avowedly sectarian poison pill" strategy.⁵⁶ This strategy involves the Assad regime holding on to Damascus and much of the state apparatus, dragging on the war in an increasingly brutal fashion which targets Sunni neighborhoods, and implicating the entire Alawite community in his crimes in order to force them into continued loyalty.

Samar Yazbek, a Syrian Alawite writer and journalist, wrote in her 2012 book on the Syrian revolution that "the Assad regime has encouraged a sort of Masada complex, goading loyalists toward extreme violence as if the sole alternative were annihilation. The effect of this...has been to implicate the Alawites as a whole in the regime's crimes...they are being used as human shields."⁵⁷

While hiding behind the bodies of his coreligionists, Assad seems to be hoping that prolonging the conflict along sectarian lines will increase discord between severely undersupplied rebels, radicalize the opposition, and prevent the Alawite community from abandoning the regime.⁵⁸

In addition to this, he hopes that the destruction of the country and the disruption of basic services will push Syrians to accept him once more, simply to end their suffering and allow Syria to return to some semblance of normalcy. He is hoping that this policy of collective punishment and scorched earth will, over time, dissuade Syrians from continuing to oppose the regime.

Furthermore, Assad's desperate strategy depends on discord and radicalization to allow extremist elements to come to dominate the armed opposition, at which time he could try to "rebrand" himself to the West as a secular ruler battling al-Qaeda affiliates. However, a statement on Syrian state TV on March 10 that called for jihad against "Zionist saboteurs" indicated that Assad's thin veneer of secularism is cracking even further, leaving almost no chance that Assad could successfully rebrand himself as a secularist.⁵⁹

Assad has Adopted a Divisive Sectarian Strategy

1. He plans to drag out the fighting and implicate the entire Alawite community in the regime's crimes.
2. He hopes prolonging the conflict will increase discord among rebels, radicalize the opposition, and eventually allow extremist elements to come to dominate the armed resistance.
3. He will then likely try to rebrand himself as secular ruler battling an al-Qaeda affiliate and resell himself to the West.
4. As Assad becomes increasingly desperate, he will increase his efforts to arm civilians, with potentially disastrous results.
5. Assad's divisive strategies must be quickly counteracted—his regime must be made to realize these strategies will fail.

His strategy also involves pushing the boundaries of what kinds of violence and atrocities the international community will tolerate. This is proven by both the gradual escalation in the brutality of attacks and the sophistication of weapons systems employed, beginning with small arms and now including SCUD missiles and even chemical weapons. As of April 13, British experts determined there was “conclusive proof” that chemical weapons have been used in Syria.⁶⁰ Attacks of this nature are clearly intended to test the international will to respond to an even more heinous escalation in violence. Mike Rogers, Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee says “it is abundantly clear that [President Obama’s] red line has been crossed.”⁶¹ The chemical weapons line has clearly been crossed. Unless the U.S. administration honors its often-stated red line on chemical weapons use, it is only a matter of time until the Assad regime concludes that the international community will permit the next escalation.

Assad’s militarization of civilians

Assad’s overtly sectarian strategy is complemented by his regime’s efforts to militarize civilians into sectarian militias. In addition to the Shabiha, which have been employed extensively by the regime and have committed many atrocities, the regime has recently created the Jaysh al-Shabi, or “the people’s army,” with the help of Iran and Hezbollah. Jaysh was created to help Assad secure control of urban centers and implicate more Alawi and Shia civilians in Assad’s crimes. It contains released prisoners, and has been blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury Department.⁶² This sectarian force of armed civilians, which includes an all-female unit, is intended to free up loyalist army brigades for combat operations, and is described in more detail in the section describing Iran and Hezbollah’s actions in Syria on page 6.⁶³ As the military’s fighting ability has eroded, it has ceded more and more of its responsibilities to these sectarian paramilitary groups.⁶⁴

Until the peaceful protests turned into armed opposition, violence in Syria was strictly monopolized by the regime. The militarization of society in particular is a disturbing departure from this historical norm for three reasons: first, armed groups organized along sectarian lines pose a serious challenge to a peaceful post-Assad transition to a democratic government. Second, the proliferation of armed civilian groups may have serious repercussions on regional security. Third, this militarization of civilians indicates a trend, in the sense that the more desperate Assad becomes, the more civilians he will arm.

CIVILIAN GOVERNANCE FROM THE BOTTOM-UP, AND THE TOP-DOWN

The civilian and military narratives of the revolution

Civilian activism, from peaceful protest to community governance efforts, represents the first narrative of the revolution. The revolution was born as a peaceful protest movement led by civilian activists who yearned for democratic reforms and political and civil rights. Many continue their activism as members of Local Administrative Councils (LACs) in their communities, in civilian-led efforts to deliver aid, and in other forms of peaceful activism.

Evolution of the LACs

Many of the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) that once documented abuses and organized protests, and in later stages distributed aid, have now evolved into Local Administrative Councils (LACs). In the past, the LCCs only had to challenge the authority of the regime, but now many have evolved into more sophisticated organizations in order to carry out dramatically different functions. In places where state institutions have disappeared, the LACs have stepped in to fill the void created by the retracting or nonexistent state.

LACs exist in all 14 provinces of Syria and are part of the Coalition. As described above, councils in fully-liberated provinces have taken on many of the tasks of government. Unlike the top-down post-Saddam government set up in Iraq, with which Syria is often inaccurately compared by pundits, these LACs have emerged as a result of need in areas where the government no longer exists or is contracting to restore critical services to their local communities. These services range from law enforcement, to education, food distribution, relief efforts, garbage removal, and more.

Membership of the LACs

The councils are often run by activists, prominent dissidents, and other individuals with administrative experience who have defected from the Syrian government. Many of their members are motivated experts trying to get their community back on its feet. For example, the medical council in Aleppo alone runs multiple underground hospitals to care for wounded civilians and fighters, and has doctors, nurses, and paramedics on staff.

The LACs are chronically short on funding. Without funding, the LACs' efforts are hamstrung: they cannot restore vital services such as law enforcement and food distribution. Plans for the provision of other government services, such as electricity, education, or health care to all but the most critically wounded are also on hold until a source of funding can be located.

Civilian & Military Narratives of Revolution

1. The revolution was born as a nonviolent protest movement.
2. Organizers who coordinated peaceful protests have now formed local councils to carry out state functions as the state retracts or disappears.
3. Military opposition began when Assad responded to peaceful protests with overwhelming violence.
4. Military opposition is necessary now because of the regime's violent repression.
5. Neither Syrians, nor the U.S. want to see armed actors dictate Syria's post-Assad future.

Syrian humanitarian NGOs in liberated areas of Syria

Dozens of Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do relief work in the liberated areas of Syria. At a conference in Istanbul, these organizations and many NGOs based in Turkey and other countries met to form a relief organizations network.⁶⁵ This network is in the process of establishing a database of their projects in order to avoid duplicating aid delivery efforts. Because most of them work in areas outside of the regime's control, these organizations do not receive financial support from the U.S.

These NGOs have the trust of the population because of their ongoing efforts on the ground in Syria, and deserve American support. These organizations are not registered with their country's government (the Assad regime) for obvious reasons, and the U.S. should not continue to disqualify them from receiving aid contracts for this reason.

The proliferation of NGOs and other actors in the liberated areas represents another administrative challenge for Syria. Once again, the role of LACs is critical to ensuring that efforts are coordinated in an orderly fashion. This cannot occur unless LACs are sufficiently empowered.

The Coalition and the LACs

The Coalition was formed, in part through the diplomatic efforts of the U.S., to serve as a future government for Syria. From its founding, it has included much deeper connections to those on the ground in Syria than its predecessor, the Syrian National Council (SNC). The Coalition has incorporated defectors, external and internal opposition groups, and all 14 provincial councils. These provincial councils, in turn, include representation from the many LACs born out of need on the ground.

Local Administrative Councils

1. LACs have emerged organically in liberated Syria to fulfill the duties of a nonexistent state.
2. The councils are run by activists, prominent civilian dissidents, and defectors from the Syrian government.
3. The efforts of the LACs are hamstrung because of their lack of funding.
4. The LACs are part of the Coalition.

Aid supplied through the Coalition will have the most direct impact on the ground in Syria. Currently, the UN spends nearly 40 percent of the aid sent to Syria to protect the international aid workers who deliver it.⁶⁶ Of the aid that actually makes it to civilians on the ground, as much as 70 percent is distributed in regime-controlled areas due to restrictions put in place by the Syrian government.⁶⁷ However, the need on the ground in Syria is greatest in the ever-expanding liberated areas.

Emergence of the military narrative

The second, and recently most dominant, narrative of the revolution is the military narrative. As Assad repressed the peaceful protesters with ever more deadly means, some members of his military refused to participate and defected. As the violence spread throughout Syria, defections continued and civilians had to take up arms to protect their homes and families, and to fight for their freedom. The armed resistance became necessary because, in the words of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Assad "has been continuously killing...That's why people, out of frustration, out of anger...have been fighting against their own government."⁶⁸

Assad's actions have made militarized opposition necessary, but Syrians, the U.S., and its regional allies agree that the militant opposition should not dictate the form of post-Assad government in Syria. Although the FSA will play an important role in enforcing law and order during the transitional period, opposition leaders agree that civilians should govern post-Assad Syria.⁶⁹

PROGRESS AND CURRENT STATUS OF THE ARMED RESISTANCE

Stalemate in the early stages

Early in the armed stages of the revolution, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) would achieve brief victories in a region, then Assad would send in loyalist ground troops and retake the area. After a short period of time, Assad had to pull these brigades out and move them to another region to do the same thing. The loyalist brigades would retake territory, but would only hold it as long as they were present. As soon as the brigades moved on, the FSA and the protesters would reemerge.

Assad's elite loyalist brigades wear down and the regime turns to the air

Assad knew deploying the entire army would risk massive defections. Therefore, he could only rely on the loyalty of a few brigades. He called on them again and again to counteract the FSA's offensives. Eventually, Assad's loyalist brigades became worn down from constant fighting and never-ending deployments and the regime was forced to change strategies. Assad pulled his ground troops back to defend Damascus and sought to harass the rebels from the air. Recently, Assad has employed SCUD missiles to complement his air force.

FSA now holds territory and makes slow but steady progress

The current situation in Syria is characterized by slow but steady progress by the rebels on the ground, with continuing aerial bombardment by the Assad regime on parts of the country its ground military can no longer reach. Recently, the increasingly desperate Assad regime has resorted to SCUDs to reach these regions. While it has become clear that Assad will eventually fall, the questions remaining are how long this will take, who will help force him from power, and what will Syria look like when he finally falls.

The main military challenge to Assad is from the north

At present, the main military challenge to Assad comes from the north. In the north, the FSA and a sympathetic Turkish government control the border and use border crossings to bring weapons shipments from other nations into the country. In the south however, Jordan and the Assad regime control the border crossings. Constricted supply makes weapons and other supplies for fighters in the south cost three to four times the already-inflated price of such goods in the north.⁷⁰

Stages of the Armed Resistance

1. The early stages were a stalemate, where loyalist brigades would retake territory from the FSA, but only hold it as long as they were present.
2. The loyalist brigades became worn down by constant deployment and the regime turned to the air.
3. The FSA now holds territory and makes slow but steady progress while the regime controls the skies and employs SCUD missiles.

The opposition's current military supplies

Because of the restrictions on materiel entering the country, the primary source of arms for opposition fighters is inside Syria itself. Rebels either acquire weapons by overrunning the regime's military bases, or by purchasing them from corrupt regime officials.⁷¹ These acquisitions are insufficient, and the opposition is severely undersupplied. Commanders cannot get enough ammunition to fight, enough food to feed their troops, or any money to pay them.⁷²

Why minimal military assistance is necessary

While many in the U.S. do not believe Americans play a significant role in supplying weapons, Saudis, Qataris, and rebel commanders in Syria say the U.S. is the primary bottleneck to increasing weapons supplies to the opposition.⁷³ They say that U.S. agencies play an important role in determining types and quantities of weapons, and who may receive them, in an effort to weed out extreme elements. The flow of weapons is extremely limited, in part because of these restrictions placed on the quantity and type of weapons Qatar and Saudi Arabia can supply.⁷⁴

In February, a temporary increase in weapons provision allowed moderate elements of the FSA to make significant gains around Damascus, in southern Syria.⁷⁵ However, these weapons were the result of one increased shipment, not of a new and sustainable supply plan. Opposition commanders worry about their ability to continue to effectively operate without a consistent supply of military aid.

The opposition still badly needs anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. Invariably all of the armed opposition groups Ghanem, a co-author of this document, met with complained of being severely undersupplied. The disparity in firepower between the Syrian regime and the opposition is stunning.⁷⁶ In fact, analyst Robin Yassin-Kassab argues that "the weapons disparity is the only reason Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad continues to believe he can win."⁷⁷

U.S. officials, including former Secretary of State Clinton and then-Secretary of Defense Panetta, along with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dempsey, and then-CIA Director Petraeus acknowledged this problem, and proposed a plan to arm carefully vetted elements of the Syrian opposition in 2012, before having it struck down by the White House.⁷⁸

Minimal assistance to the SMC is necessary both to allow the Coalition to be set up as a credible government on Syrian territory, and to increase the military pressure on Assad. Once the Assad regime can no longer freely resupply isolated military bases or use terror bombing to prevent the delivery of critical supplies to civilians in liberated areas, it will become clear to the regime's supporters that Assad cannot win and must come to the negotiating table.

AMERICAN AID TO SYRIA

The U.S. currently supplies two kinds of aid to Syria. The State Department describes these two types of aid as “non-lethal” and “humanitarian.” American non-lethal aid consists of communications equipment and training for individual activists, as well as the limited medical and food aid for the FSA recently announced by Secretary Kerry in Rome. For the first two years of the revolution, this aid was distributed through an office in Istanbul. Secretary Kerry’s announcement implies that this structure will change in the near future. The humanitarian assistance consists of aid and supplies to help alleviate the suffering of Syrian civilians, and is funneled through third party organizations, such as the UNHCR, the World Food Program, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.⁷⁹ These organizations do good work serving refugees in Syria’s neighbors, although their efforts are chronically underfunded. However, those who operate inside Syria distribute much of the aid in regime-held areas, where it directly or indirectly benefits the regime.⁸⁰

Additionally, most American aid to Syria is not branded—that is, it is not clear to those who receive it that it comes from the American people, leading many Syrians to believe that the U.S. is not following through on its promises of aid. Unbranded aid distribution through third party organizations does not help counter the growing resentment towards the U.S. on the ground because it further conceals the original source of the aid. Furthermore, this aid is not being distributed in the neediest areas.

A bipartisan Senate delegation, which returned from the Middle East in January, discussed the reasons providing aid in the current manner is problematic. In the press conference following their trip, Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) said the U.S. is “delivering significant humanitarian assistance into Syria, but it’s going through international aid agencies and being distributed out of Damascus, rather than in ways that strengthen the credibility and the reach and the effectiveness of the Syrian Opposition Council.”⁸¹

Problems with aid distributed through Damascus

Aid to international organizations which assist refugees in neighboring countries is laudable. However the current aid distribution method, employing organizations controlled by, or closely associated with, the Assad regime is highly problematic in three ways: First, it does not effectively reach those in the liberated areas who are most in need. Second, it does not help the vital grassroots governance efforts emerging in these areas that are crucial for preventing Syria from descending into anarchy. Third, it does not increase the effectiveness or bolster the legitimacy of the main opposition body, the Coalition.

The Comprehensive Strategy section of this paper (p. 20) addresses these three problems with current methods of aid distribution and recommends policy changes.

American Aid to Syria

1. The U.S. supplies substantial humanitarian assistance, mostly through third-party organizations.
2. Most humanitarian aid to Syria currently goes through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other regime-controlled organizations.
3. This aid helps some in need, but does not reach those who are most in need, does not help grassroots governance efforts, and does not strengthen the credibility or effectiveness of the Coalition.
4. Aid passes through many third party organizations, each with their own overhead and security costs, limiting the amount of aid that reaches the ground.

See *Appendix A* for visual representation of U.S. humanitarian and diplomatic aid

SUPPORTING COALITION GOVERNANCE AND THE SMC

The Coalition and as a viable political alternative

The Obama administration has said that the Coalition must be a legitimate government on the ground, effectively controlling territory, in order to gain full recognition. In late March 2013, the Coalition took a significant step toward this goal by electing Ghassan Hitto to the position of Interim Prime Minister.⁸² The interim government, headed by Hitto, will coordinate governance and aid in the liberated areas of Syria. It is not a transitional government. Rather, its primary role is administrative, meaning it will oversee the management of the liberated areas of Syria. The people of Syria will establish a transitional government to take over the position of the interim government when Assad falls. For now, Syrian revolutionaries, including the SMC and Local Administrative Councils, have expressed the need for an interim government to lead, coordinate, and prepare for a transitional government. It will help fill the political vacuum and avoid chaos.

In addition to establishing an interim government domestically, the Coalition is also making progress toward becoming a functional and internationally-recognized government. In late March, the Coalition's first official embassy was opened in Doha, Qatar.⁸³ The Coalition has also taken Syria's seat at the Arab League, seen as a "symbolic but important" step towards becoming the internationally-recognized government of Syria.⁸⁴ The Coalition's mission in New York is actively lobbying the UN to have the credentialing committee suggest the transfer of Syria's UN seat to the Coalition at its next meeting in September. Once introduced, such a measure will require a 2/3 majority in the General Assembly.

Security for the Coalition

In order for the Coalition to complete its transition from opposition to government, it must be able to perform its governmental functions on the ground in Syria. To do so, it and the members of its transitional government must be safe from Assad's air force and missiles. This requires either military support for the SMC or multilateral action.

Without some form of anti-missile or anti-aircraft assistance, any efforts to establish a credible, effective central government in the liberated areas will be met with a deadly campaign of aerial bombardment. The danger for the members of the Coalition was emphasized by the March car-bomb attack on FSA leader Colonel Riad Al-Asaad while he was travelling to visit FSA commanders in northern Syria.⁸⁵ Col. Asaad narrowly escaped death, but lost a leg.

Once the Coalition and its interim government are established on the ground in Syria, they can be granted full recognition—but they need assistance and protection to reach that point. Empowering and protecting the Coalition and its interim government so that they can become a functional government based on Syrian soil is a critical component of the Comprehensive Strategy section of this paper.

A Comprehensive Strategy

THE IDEAL PATH FOR U.S. POLICY

The U.S. should aggressively seek to create conditions conducive to a negotiated settlement between the opposition and those members of the Assad regime who do not have blood on their hands, as outlined above in the section describing the Coalition's conditions for negotiation. The goal of a settlement must be the departure of the Assad regime, and a transfer of full executive authority from the regime to the opposition-led transitional government.

The vast majority of the expansive government bureaucracy in Syria comprises honest, hard-working Syrians trying to operate and perform basic government services. However, the corruption of the Assad regime and its 300-400 corrupt political appointees at the tops of agencies and the military have spawned an uprising, social decay, and economic depression. These elements of the regime must go if there is to be any hope for a peaceful and prosperous Syria. Coalition political leadership and interim technocratic government support staff can fill the holes and help Syria transition for a limited period of time until elections are held and a government is seated.

HELP EMPOWER CIVILIAN GOVERNANCE

While military leaders are critical to winning the revolution in the near term, the U.S. must clearly demonstrate through its policies, and not simply through its rhetoric, that a civilian government is the only acceptable post-Assad government for Syria. The U.S. says it supports moderates and civilians, but its ponderous response to the crisis has "increased the disillusionment among the Syrian people—further incentivizing their support for radicals and hurting Western chances to create alliances with future leaders in Syria."⁸⁶ The U.S. must adopt policies which actively engage the opposition through the empowerment of civilian leaders over military leaders.

Empowerment from the Bottom-Up

1. LAC's are crucial for ensuring the transition to a civilian-led democracy.
2. The councils are desperately short on funding. This acute lack of resources prevents them from meeting their communities' needs.
3. The U.S. should develop a working relationship with these future leaders of Syria by financially supporting their governance efforts.

Empowerment from the Top-Down

1. Use the Coalition, its interim government, its ACU, and NGOs to deliver humanitarian aid to areas most in need in order to increase the legitimacy and credibility of the Coalition as a future government and avoid the legal hurdles and staggering inefficiencies faced by the U.N.
2. Because it incorporates the LACs on the ground throughout Syria, aid supplied through the Coalition will have the biggest impact in the neediest areas.
3. Without external support, the Coalition will fail like the Syrian National Council, and lose its legitimacy and ability to govern. Any future attempts at forming opposition umbrella groups will be impossible.

See *Appendix B* for visual representation of how to empower civilian governance efforts.

Hurdles facing civilian governance efforts

When citizens' basic needs cannot be met by the government, they will look elsewhere. Legitimacy in Syria, as elsewhere, comes to those who are able to deliver on their promises and meet people's needs. Civilian governance efforts will become empowered and recognized as a legitimate source of authority only when they have the capability to deliver critical goods and services to their devastated communities.

Use civilian aid to counter influence of Jabhat al-Nusra

Aid used to help civilian governance efforts succeed will reduce the prominence and appeal of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. We have long said that the vacuum being left by the state can be filled by any organization capable of providing necessary services and security. Al-Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra is benefitting from this situation, in part because of its "refusal to engage in looting and other predatory behavior, [and] its emphasis on crude but egalitarian justice and social services."⁸⁷ It is "filling a power vacuum through charitable efforts to galvanize local support" and is generating influence.⁸⁸

Instead, the U.S. and its allies must use their aid resources to enable legitimate civilian governance groups to provide critical goods and services to their communities. We are hopeful that Secretary Kerry's announcement of new non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition indicates American willingness to empower these civilian governance efforts. Reluctance to act will only play into the hands of the extremists who are hoping to establish a form of government at odds with the wishes and aspirations of Syrians.

Build relationships with the future leaders of Syria, empowering civilians from the bottom up

Bottom-up civilian efforts will be critical to helping Syria transition to a civilian-led democracy. The individuals who work on the Local Administrative Councils represent the political future of Syria. They are the people operating on the ground, forging relationships and political entities to meet pressing challenges. The U.S. must adopt policies which will support the LACs' efforts to wrest increasing control over their communities from military factions by reducing the role of militants in governance functions. This will ensure governance by civilians at the local level. In so doing, the U.S. will be building relationships with the future political leaders of Syria.

The LACs can help ensure an orderly transition

Of all the recent wars in the Middle East, the Syrian revolution is a unique case. In Syria, local governments have formed organically from the bottom-up and included members of the previous government, instead of being imposed from above at the end of the conflict like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Because of this difference, these LACs represent a unique opportunity for the U.S. to help orchestrate a smooth and orderly transition of power which preserves national institutions and avoids chaos. If this opportunity is missed and the LACs do not receive enough support to provide critical services for their communities, Syria could become a failed state, along the lines of Somalia.

Supporting the Councils will ensure an Orderly Transition

- 1.** Only in Syria has a bottom-up government formed while the conflict is still ongoing.
- 2.** Because the councils emerged organically and contain defectors from the Syrian government, the U.S. has a unique opportunity to help orchestrate a smooth transition of power which preserves national institutions.

Empower civilians from the top-down by working with the Coalition

The Coalition is also unique, in that it includes organic connections to the local level, as the LACs are constituent parts of the Coalition. The U.S. should complement the bottom-up civilian empowerment strategy outlined above with a top-down strategy to build on these two unique characteristics of the Syrian revolution.

A critical element of this top-down empowerment is to make the Coalition the primary recipient of non-lethal U.S. aid to Syria. Since the provincial and local councils are constituent members of the Coalition, this non-lethal aid will also help these local governance structures to increase their capacity.

Deliver non-lethal aid through the Coalition and use the Coalition to target humanitarian aid

We have long advocated for U.S. non-lethal assistance to be delivered directly to the Coalition, or in close coordination with the Coalition, rather than at random to individual activists. U.S. policy seems to be slowly shifting in this direction, but a more explicit commitment to deliver non-lethal assistance in this manner would greatly bolster the capacity and legitimacy of the Coalition. The Coalition requires non-lethal aid assistance in order to increase its governing capacity, to become empowered to meet Syrians' needs, to ensure its continued legitimacy, and to continue to help the U.S. target its humanitarian aid delivery to the liberated areas of Syria.

We have also advocated for the Coalition to be the channel through which humanitarian aid is funneled to the liberated areas of Syria. Unfortunately, the position of the U.S. government is that they will work with the Coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) to target humanitarian aid delivery, but that the ACU itself will not receive any support.⁸⁹ Using the Coalition, the ACU, the provincial councils, and the NGOs operating in the liberated areas of Syria in defiance of the Assad regime to deliver humanitarian aid will avoid the hurdles the U.N faces in delivering aid to the same areas. Salman Shaikh, of the Brookings Institution's Doha office, observed that "other organizations can work in the north [of Syria] if the UN can't. The opposition coalition has plans for humanitarian aid, but no one is giving them the money that was promised."⁹⁰ Even UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos has stated that "limited access in the north is a problem that can only be solved using alternative methods of aid delivery."⁹¹ Using the Coalition, its interim government, its ACU, and NGOs is the most viable alternative method to deliver aid into the liberated areas of Syria. However, the U.S. has moved in the opposite direction, having recently begun working with NGOs picked from a list of organizations provided by the Assad regime.⁹²

The Coalition can deliver aid in Syria more efficiently

Once the Coalition receives assistance to increase its capacity, it can support its provincial and local councils to become viable local governments, while its ACU can continue to build its network to target the distribution of aid more effectively, and with lower security costs, to the areas that need it the most. American aid provided to refugees in neighboring countries through the UN should continue to be distributed through these expert international non-

Two Kinds of U.S. Aid

1. Non-lethal: Should be given primarily or exclusively to the Coalition to help it build capacity and increase its legitimacy.

2. Humanitarian: Should be channeled to the neediest areas through the Coalition's provincial councils, ACU, and the NGOs with access and capacity to operate in the North.

governmental organizations, but aid sent into Syria should be distributed according to aid targeting information provided by the Coalition's ACU. Doing so will help to bolster a framework that the U.S. helped create, and will eliminate the middleman in aid delivery.

Acting as swiftly as possible to alter the distribution of future aid will increase American leverage in post-Assad Syria, allowing the U.S. to help shape what comes after Assad. Groups currently vying for influence in Syria include both pro-democracy forces friendly to American ideals, and those who do not share the goal of a free and democratic Syria. Continued inaction will leave the U.S. with little or no ability to influence the forces shaping a new Syria.

Help the Coalition meet the expenses of governing Syria

In addition to the policy recommendations outlined above, the U.S. can help the Coalition cover the costs of governing Syria by helping it gain access to frozen Syrian assets. The U.S. should spearhead a diplomatic effort to turn these assets in international banks over to the Coalition, so that these investments and assets of regime officials can be used to help the people of Syria rebuild their country and their communities. Support for the Coalition's bid for Syria's U.N. seat would speed up this process.

INCREASE POLITICAL PRESSURE TO END ASSAD'S DELUSIONS OF RETAINING POWER

The US should redouble its efforts to force the Assad regime to engage in negotiations along the lines outlined above, so that the complicit members of the regime leave, but the state structure is preserved to the greatest extent possible. U.S. strategy has hoped to preserve the state structure. However, continuing to delay action in hopes that negotiations will do so has the perverse effect of allowing the state structure to be further destroyed.

To preserve state structures and achieve a political settlement, the U.S. should take three political steps.

First, the U.S. should, as it has not yet done, cut off all diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, given its intransigence and record of egregious human rights violations. Cutting off diplomatic relations is necessary to prove U.S. resolve and to send a serious message to Assad and his clique that the U.S. is moving beyond him, as Syria has already done, and that he is better off engaging in genuine negotiations than further isolating himself and damaging his prospects of a peaceful exit. No key defections in Assad's inner circle will occur unless American policy makes it clear to that inner circle that Assad will have no role in future Syria.

Military and Diplomatic Policies to Increase the Pressure on Assad

- 1.** Send serious message that the U.S. is moving beyond Assad by cutting off all diplomatic relations.
- 2.** Help the Coalition to become a credible alternative government on Syrian soil.
- 3.** Provide limited assistance to the SMC to help them defend the liberated areas of Syria from Assad's air force.
- 4.** Grant the Coalition full recognition at the soonest possible date.
- 5.** Make it easier for fighters in southern Syria to get weapons in order to apply bidirectional military pressure on Assad in Damascus.

Second, the U.S. should move quickly to build on the diplomatic successes of Doha and Marrakech by helping the Coalition and its interim government to become a credible alternative government established on Syrian soil. Large sections of Syria, particularly in the north and east of the country, have been liberated from the Assad regime, but Assad's air power prevents the Coalition from effectively administering these regions by disrupting transportation and terrorizing the population.

American support for the Coalition and its interim government is of particular importance to ensuring stability in Syria. The interim government needs support to lead and coordinate local governance efforts in Syria, and to prepare the way for a transitional government and a post-Assad Syria. If properly supported, it can fill the developing security vacuum in Syria and thereby isolate extremist groups. On the international stage, American support will also be important for the Coalition; while the Coalition has taken Syria's seat at the Arab League and is seeking its UN seat, American support for the transfer of the Syrian UN seat would accelerate the process.

Third, the U.S. should work with its allies to choke off the flow of arms, resources, and money to Assad. This issue is addressed at length in a March 2013 report by Human Rights First, titled *Enablers of the Syrian Conflict: How Targeting Third Parties Can Slow the Atrocities in Syria*.⁹³ The first focus of this effort should be to pressure Iraq to prevent Russia and Iran from using Iraqi airspace as an arms corridor to Syria.

While efforts to date to convince the Iraqi government to cooperate have been unsuccessful, the U.S. can take further action. It should "tie continuing aid to the Iraqi government to the condition that it ceases support [for] the Assad regime and prevents the use of Iraqi territory and airspace for the transport of fighters and weapons into Syria."⁹⁴ A visit to Baghdad by Secretary Kerry and a late-March letter from members of Congress to Prime Minister al-Maliki are steps in the right direction, but more aggressive action is needed to stem the flow of support for Assad through Iraq.⁹⁵

Formal recognition will empower the organically-growing LACs and the Coalition

To help the LACs become functioning local governance structures, and to help the Coalition become a functioning national government, the U.S. must grant the Coalition full recognition at the soonest possible date, and must help it find the resources necessary to support governance efforts in the liberated parts of Syria. Coalition research has shown that it will cost about \$500 million per month to administer the liberated regions of Syria.⁹⁶ This figure includes critical humanitarian aid. Formal recognition will facilitate this funding, as recognition will allow for NGOs and the Coalition itself to provide increased humanitarian aid already committed by the international community, and will allow the Coalition to tap into frozen Syrian assets abroad.⁹⁷

American policy already acknowledges the necessity of working more closely with the Coalition, but has not gone to sufficient lengths to ensure this desired outcome. Recognizing the Coalition as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people was an important step, but it is insufficient. Unless the U.S. moves quickly, the Coalition will be discredited on the ground in Syria, just as the SNC was before it. The litmus test of any organization is whether or not it can deliver to its constituents on the ground.⁹⁸ The international community cannot afford another failed Syrian opposition organization. If the Coalition fails, Syrians will not trust any future opposition group. Consequently, the U.S. will be faced with the nearly insurmountable challenge of dealing with hundreds of civilian and military factions in different regions of Syria.

The Coalition must be defended so it can fulfill its governmental functions

To establish sufficient security for the Coalition to fulfill its governmental functions in Syria, either the opposition would need to be provided with anti-aircraft weapons so they can establish a limited no-fly zone, or the U.S. and NATO would need to use their Patriot missile batteries in Turkey against regime aircraft and against SCUD and Fatah 110 missiles targeting opposition-held areas.⁹⁹ Commander of U.S. European Command and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Admiral James Stavridis testified that "the Patriot missile batteries that have already been deployed to southern Turkey could be positioned ... to protect [a] safe zone, and doing so would be a powerful disincentive for the Assad regime's pilots to fly in that area."¹⁰⁰ To pursue either of these policies, the U.S. should work with the Supreme Military Command (SMC), the command structure that was established to unify the ranks of the military opposition (including the FSA) on December 7, 2012 in Antalya, Turkey.¹⁰¹

INCREASE MILITARY PRESSURE TO SHAKE ASSAD FROM HIS ILLUSIONS OF SECURITY

Support the Supreme Military Command

The U.S. long called for the creation of a unified Syrian military command. Now that the unified command structure exists, it must be quickly supported. Failing to support the SMC risks the organization being unable to exert control over the various armed groups and has the potential to lead to its irrelevance or dissolution. Senator Rubio addressed the importance of empowering the SMC as a unified command structure on his recent trip to the Middle East, when he said that "our hope is to learn...from the Libyan experience where that didn't happen. We had all these dispersed militias (which) to this day have not come under central control."¹⁰²

Working with the SMC also serves another important function. Providing military support through this democratic organization which submits to the civilian oversight of the Coalition will help it to exercise control over different fighting groups in Syria. Commanders on the ground say that different sources of military aid, usually provided by Qatar or Saudi Arabia according to conflicting agendas, are the single largest source of division between armed opposition forces.¹⁰³ Currently, a minimal trickle of resources comes from many different providers. If the Coalition, through the Supreme Military Command, can be the sole source of logistical support for revolutionary forces, this patchwork system of loyalties can be corrected.

Any cooperation with or supply to the SMC must, at minimum, eliminate the Assad regime's ability to destroy the remaining infrastructure of the liberated areas and to terrorize civilians from above. If the U.S. is not willing to use NATO assets to shield liberated areas as discussed above, it still has options. The U.S. could either directly provide anti-aircraft weapons to the SMC, or could indirectly provide them by permitting other countries to deliver these weapons to the SMC, with U.S. vetting and approval. A similar plan was suggested by high-ranking U.S. national security officials, including Secretary Clinton, Secretary Panetta, and Director Petraeus in 2012.¹⁰⁴

In March 2013, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs panel, Representative Eliot Engel, along with co-sponsors Representatives Mike Rogers and Brad Sherman, announced their new legislation to allow the President to arm the Syrian rebels.¹⁰⁵ Regarding arming elements of the opposition, Rep. Engel said "we know who they are and I think it's time we make that move."¹⁰⁶

With basic, minimal assistance to the opposition, the SMC can challenge the Assad regime's unquestioned control of the skies over the liberated areas. This strategy of working with identified partners will produce the desired results at the least risk to the U.S. and its allies. Secretary Kerry recently spoke to the capacity of the SMC and to its ability to responsibly utilize additional assistance. He said that "there is a very clear ability now in the Syrian opposition to make certain that what goes to the moderate, legitimate opposition is, in fact, getting to them, and the indication is that they are increasing their pressure as a result of that."¹⁰⁷

The SMC's progress toward defeating Assad can and should be expedited through American assistance. This would be in America's strategic interest; the Assad regime is continually losing territory. If the current trends continue, and the SMC is not empowered or assisted, militant groups like Jabat al-Nusra, Hezbollah, and Jaysh al-Shabi will come to rule the areas beyond regime control. However, if the U.S. and its allies support the SMC and the Coalition, they can help ensure moderate, civilian rule in these areas.

Increase pressure in the South

Military pressure from the South is necessary to sufficiently shake Assad from his illusions of security. The U.S. should support policies that will make it easier for fighters in southern Syria to get weapons and thereby exert bi-directional pressure on Assad. The U.S., in cooperation with Jordan, must help the FSA in the South in order to increase the military pressure on Assad. There appears to have been some encouraging movement in this direction recently, although no definitive policy changes have yet been adopted.¹⁰⁸ Any overt or covert operations to supply the FSA in the South should be supported and expanded.

THE EFFECTS OF EXERTING MILITARY AND POLITICAL PRESSURE ON ASSAD

Changing policies to exert both diplomatic and military pressure on Assad will force him to abandon his divisive and destructive "poison pill" strategy. The international community has agreed on a general framework for negotiations, but until Assad is forced to accept the political and military realities of the situation, and sees that he cannot ride out the movement against him, he will continue to refuse meaningful negotiations.

Enabling the Coalition to establish itself as a credible alternative government in Syria will demonstrate to the members of Assad's regime that his claims of control over the country are false. Increasing military pressure will demonstrate to Assad and the members of his regime that no form of military victory is possible. When regime officials see that a military resolution is not possible, and that an alternative government exists, defections will increase dramatically. This will force Assad and his ruling clique to face reality and engage in meaningful negotiations to save themselves.

Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress have urged the White House to do more to support the opposition and exert pressure on Assad in this manner. Their proposals range from increased support for the Coalition's governance efforts, to providing ammunition to the FSA, to selective arming of vetted elements of the FSA, to a NATO-imposed No-Fly Zone.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the Chairman of the Armed Service Committee Carl Levin and Senator John McCain called for the U.S. to enforce a No-Fly zone and destroy Assad's air assets in an open letter to the president. They cited General Mattis, Commander of U.S. Central Command's statement that this could be done in such a way that it "would not require American or allied pilots to fly into the reach of Syria's air defenses."¹¹⁰ Also in March, two bills with bipartisan sponsorship were introduced; one in the Senate and another in the House.¹¹¹ These bills are broadly intended to encourage the Obama administration to exert military and political pressure on Assad as outlined above.

The window for meaningful action is closing, however. Assad's terrible and divisive strategies must be counteracted quickly. As the conflict drags on with minimal outside support for the opposition, extremist elements will increase in prominence and the situation will play into Assad's hands. If the status quo is allowed to persist, the "Assad/al-Qaeda tag team" will crowd out moderate opponents and make Syria ungovernable.¹¹² The U.S. must not permit this to happen, as it would both exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and have serious consequences for American national security interests.

Clear, game-changing pressure is needed to bring Assad to the negotiating table. This pressure must be both political and military in nature. That is, Assad must realize that he cannot win and that his "poison pill" strategy will fail. The people of Syria--especially members of the Assad regime--must see that the international community and the U.S. are moving beyond Assad, and that there is a viable political alternative to his rule.

Conclusion

The situation in Syria is deteriorating rapidly. Concerns about the ongoing humanitarian disaster, which is destabilizing U.S. allies, and about American national security interests throughout the region should compel the U.S. to take more assertive action to help resolve the Syrian crisis. In addition to relieving the humanitarian suffering, the U.S. stands to make significant gains by helping expedite Assad's departure from power and by supporting a transition to democracy. The chance to deprive Iran of its only Arab ally, weaken Iran's terrorist proxy Hezbollah, restore regional stability, maintain the integrity of U.S. allies, and gain influence in post-Assad Syria is an opportunity that the U.S. cannot afford to squander.

Assad is pursuing a deliberately sectarian strategy in hopes of drawing out the conflict long enough to increase discord among severely under-funded rebels, radicalize the opposition, and allow extremist elements to come to dominate the armed resistance. Assad hopes to make Syria's minorities and the outside world afraid of what kind of government would replace him, in order to regain some shred of legitimacy. If the conflict is allowed to continue along its current trajectory without outside assistance, all realistically possible outcomes are potentially damaging to regional peace and stability, as well as long-term U.S. interests.

The Syrian Coalition, the opposition's internationally-recognized main umbrella group, has made repeated entreaties for negotiation with members of the Syrian government, but Assad has adamantly refused to come to the table. The U.S. is hoping to resolve the conflict through a negotiated settlement in which members of the opposition and the Syrian government agree on a transitional governing mechanism along the lines of the Geneva framework. The U.S. has pursued this path for many months, oblivious to the fact that conditions on the ground are not yet conducive to a negotiated settlement.

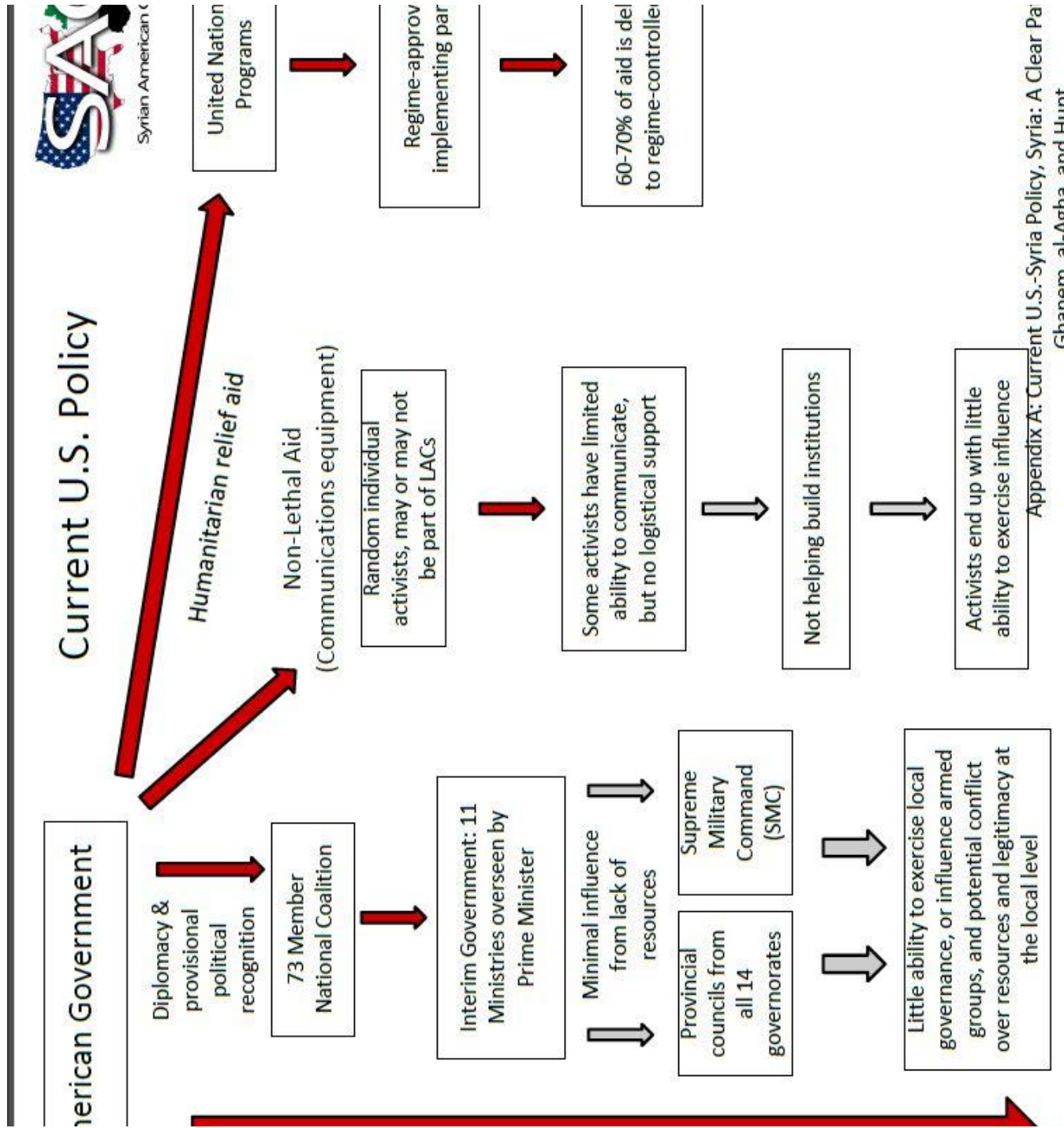
The U.S. and its partners should alter these conditions to make them more likely to produce meaningful negotiations that will result in the departure of the Assad regime and the transfer of full executive authority to a transitional government led by the Coalition and cooperating members of the current government. To that end, political and military pressure from within Syria is required to force Assad and the members of his regime to realize that they cannot emerge victorious by military means. Until the current dynamic is changed, Assad can maintain his delusional hopes of military victory and will continue to refuse to negotiate, thereby prolonging the conflict and all of its adverse consequences. For the U.S. to pursue this hope without working to create the conditions on the ground to expedite it has the perverse consequences of permitting further destruction of state institutions under the name of a plan to save them.

Unless swift action is taken, Syria will continue down the path towards systemic state failure. This outcome would be disastrous not only for Syrians, but for U.S. allies and American interests in a critical region of the world. As the violence in Syria continues, it is placing an increasing strain on Syria's neighbors, many of whom are American allies. This strain will only get worse the longer the conflict grinds on.

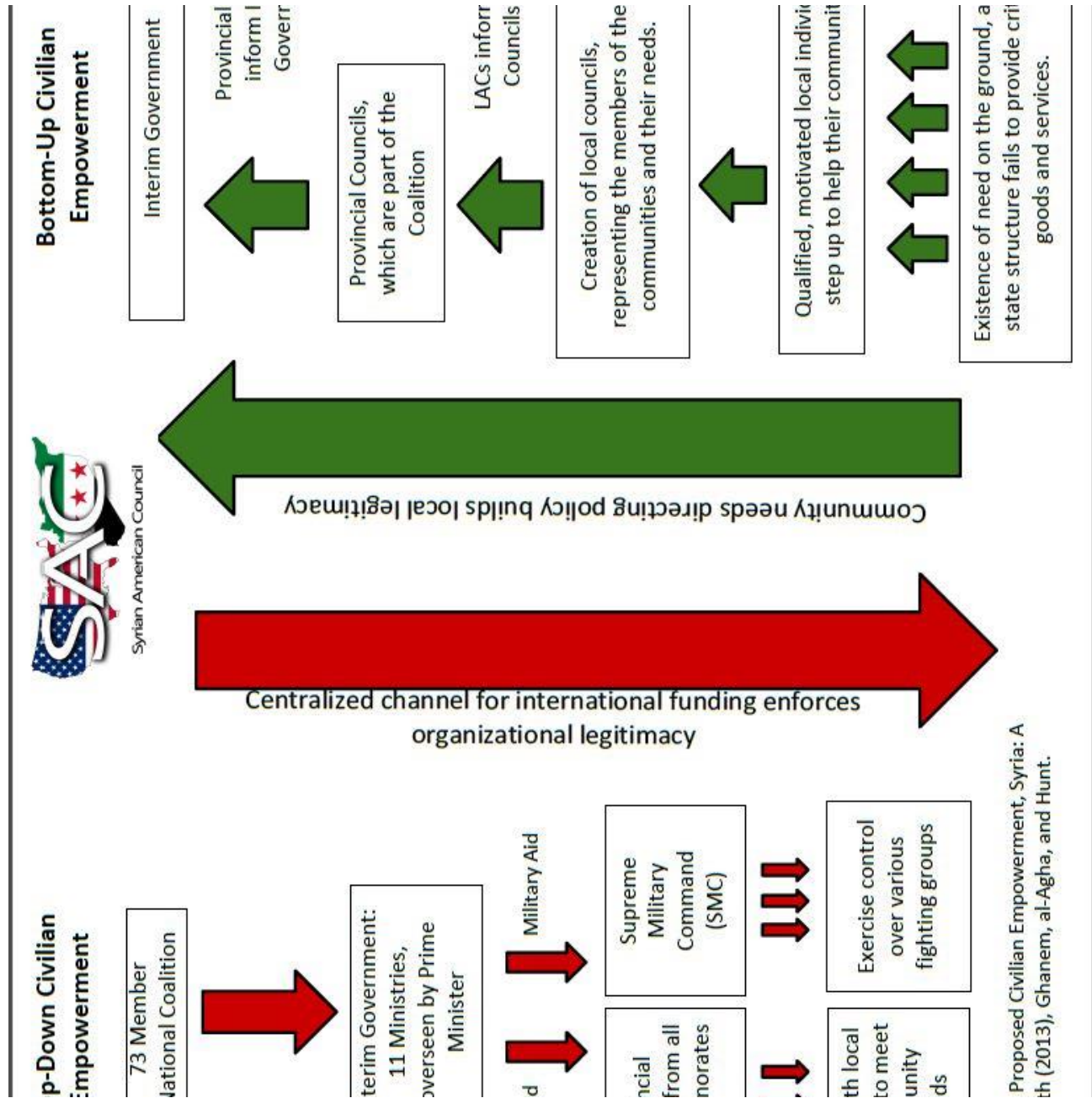
To ensure a civilian-led future in Syria, civilians must be empowered, both from the bottom-up and from the top-down. Empowering civilians will enable them to defend their hold on Syria's future. Without the resources to provide basic goods and services and provide badly-needed governance in the liberated areas, the organic civilian governance efforts represented by the Local Administrative Councils and the civilian opposition risk losing legitimacy. Better-funded extremist groups will gain an opportunity to further establish themselves.

The U.S. has the capability to force Assad to the negotiating table, and to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of civilian governance efforts in the liberated regions with or without direct American military involvement. However, the situation in Syria has been allowed to spin out of control for too long, and the window for effective action is rapidly closing. This policy brief outlines a clear strategy that the U.S. should quickly pursue in order to leverage its resources to achieve its policy goals in Syria without being drawn into a prolonged commitment.

Appendix A: Current U.S. Policy



Appendix B: Civilian Empowerment



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