



Regime Collapse in Syria: Expectations and Implications

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Authors: Ali Jafri, ajafri@nsiteam.com
Alex Goncharova

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What is NSI Reachback?

The Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the Joint Staff, Services, and United States Government (USG) Agencies, has established a Reachback capability based on the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team’s global network of scholars and area experts. It provides Combatant Commands with population-based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations. The Reachback team combines written and interview elicitations with additional research and analyses to provide concise responses to time-sensitive questions.

This report responds to one of a series of questions posed by USCENTCOM about the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region.¹

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¹ Please contact Sarah Canna (scanna@nsiteam.com or sarah.a.canna.ctr@mail.mil) for more details related to SMA’s “Assessment of Strategic Implications of Population Dynamics in the Central Region” study.

Question of Focus

[A5] What would Syria look like with a total regime collapse? What leader/entity would take control if the regime collapses?

Regime Collapse in Syria: Expectations and Implications²

At present, collapse of the Assad regime in Syria is generally considered to be a remote possibility for three reasons: the Syrian government’s consolidation of power, a fragmented opposition, and the resolve of international actors who are strongly committed to the survival of the regime. The 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment authored by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence noted that the Assad regime held momentum and was supported by Iran and Russia as it continued consolidating territorial gains (Coats, 2019). Furthermore, an October 2019 study estimated that the Assad regime holds control over 60 percent of Syria, though “its control outside Damascus is tenuous” (Syria Study Group, 2019). Since that time, the regime has embarked on a campaign against rebel forces in Idlib, which only recently ended in a ceasefire (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Iran and Russia are strongly invested in the Syrian regime, and signs of an impending collapse would likely prompt a decisive response from one or both. This reflects Russia’s strategic economic ties with Syria, ability to project power and enhance its international prestige, and desire to protect basing agreements negotiated with the Assad regime. Iran, relatedly, seeks a geographic link with Hezbollah, understands the Assad regime to be a bulwark against Saudi (and Sunni) influence in the region, and also can use Syria as a basing area for activities against Israel. Furthermore, the Assad regime’s Alawite background is related to the Twelver branch of Shi’a Islam championed by Iran (Khalaji, 2013; Smyth, 2018).

Because of these dynamics, a good case can be made that absent a meaningful and deep political resolution, large numbers of the Syrian population will continue to be subject to many of the regime-initiated horrors that have been inflicted on them for decades. Sadly, if the regime were to collapse, the immediate result for many Syrians would be the same: widespread economic, political, and social chaos in Syria generated by post-Assad warlordism and internecine and state-sponsored violence. Conventional wisdom holds that there are too many conflicting political agendas supported by violent means to produce an inclusive political settlement in the near- to mid-term. In short, the suffering of the Syrian people will likely continue whether the regime remains or collapses from internal pressure (e.g., competition among sub-state power centers) or external interference.

Again, for reasons described in subsequent sections of this report, most scholars see very little possibility of a collapse of the Assad regime in the foreseeable future. Relatedly, it is difficult to identify specific entities or individuals that might assume power if the regime does collapse. This is due to the number of competing interests in Syria today, including tribal affiliations, which for reasons of scope, are not included in this report. These dynamics combine to forecast continued chaos and fragmentation of the country in the event of a regime collapse. The key findings of this report suggest that if a collapse of the regime were to occur:

² The following subject matter experts kindly contributed to this analysis: **Anna Borshchevskaya** (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), **Hassan Hassan** (Center for Global Policy), **Faysal Itani** (Center for Global Policy), **Dr. Arie Kruglanski** (University of Maryland), and **Mona Yacoubian** (United States Institute of Peace).

1. Precipitating factors are likely to include a number of internal pressures including an ongoing financial crisis and competition for resources and influence among the myriad Syrian government and externally-funded security services operating in Syria.
2. Collapse would probably activate armed groups across the country including violent non-state actors and state actors alike.

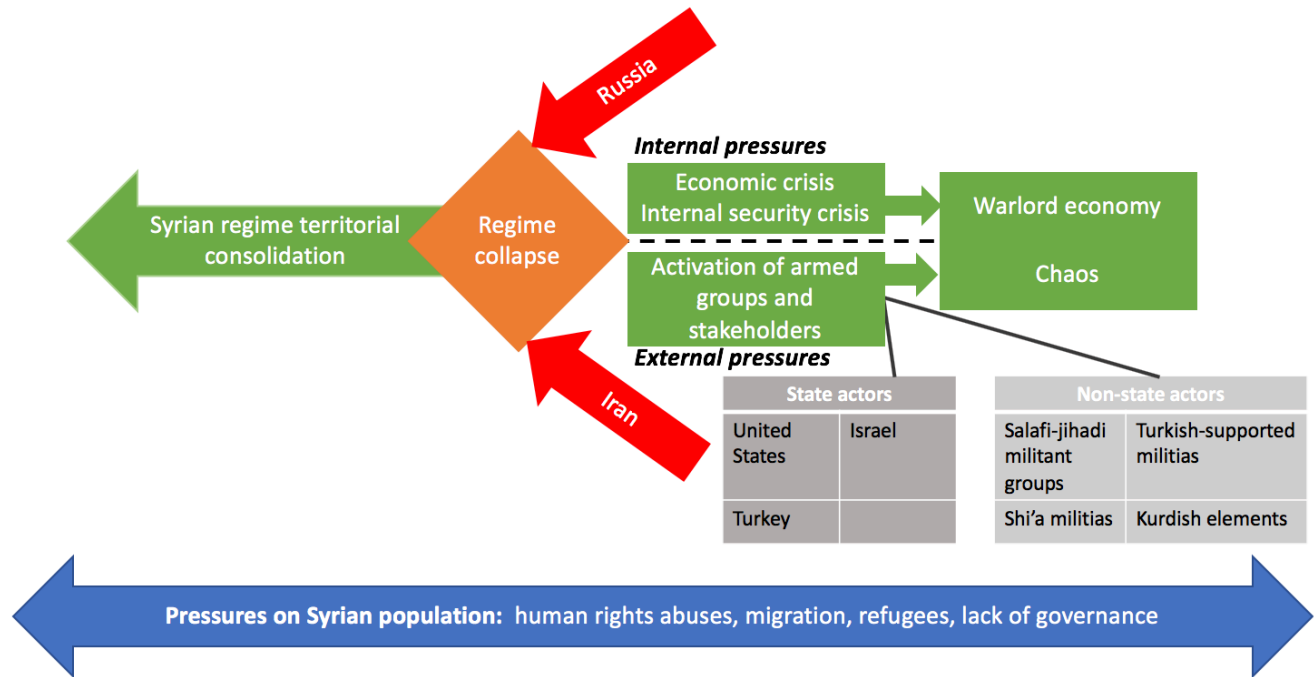


Figure 1. Regime Collapse in Syria: Pressures For and Against

As shown in *Figure 1*, there are forces at work in Syria that both work to shield the Assad regime from collapse and, if those should fail or recede, could precipitate a collapse. Each is discussed in more detail below.

Forces Prohibiting Regime Collapse

As mentioned above, the Assad regime has consolidated much of the territory that it had ceded over the course of the civil war. These gains, however, are misleading measures of the regime's present strength and governing capability (Khatib, 2020). In reality, the regime's lack of internal capacity keeps it reliant on Iranian and Russian security assistance (Syria Study Group, 2019). Operationally, Syrian security forces rely heavily on support from Iranian ground forces as well as Russian air capabilities (Syria Study Group, 2019; Borshchevskaya, 2019). The military assistance and support that the Iranian and Russian tethers provide are paradoxically an indication of both the relative strength of the regime against its adversaries, and its weaknesses. In short, the existence of the Assad regime appears to rest, in part, on the strength of Iranian and Russian interests in Syria.

Russia's Interests

Russia is strongly committed to the Syrian regime for many reasons, including political influence in the region, Russian national security, and economic interests. Some have argued that Russian operations in Syria also serve another purpose: they serve as a platform for projecting Russia's image as a great power and as a way to erode

Washington's influence in the world order (Borshchevskaya, 2019; Charap et al., 2019).³ The Assad regime pledged to provide preferential status to Russian investments in Syria's energy sector, which has led to lucrative exploration and development activities by Russian companies (Mammadov & Karasik, 2019). Concurrently, the Russian military enjoys access to naval and air facilities in Syria, similarly granted by the Assad regime (Mammadov & Karasik, 2019). In the event of a potential collapse of the Assad regime, Russia will almost certainly try to leverage its diplomatic position, protect its access to energy resources and military facilities, and do everything in its power to ensure a successor that would continue to guarantee its privileged status in Syria (Hassan & Itani, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2020).⁴

Iran's Interests

Much like Russia, Iran has strong ties to the Assad regime and, despite disagreements, maintains what has been described as an "alliance of convenience" with Russia in Syria in order to preserve the current regime (Syria Study Group, 2019; Khatib & Sinjab, 2018). Because of its close relationship with the Assad regime, and its myriad activities within Syria, Iran "has wide latitude to pursue its own geopolitical agenda on Syrian territory, including the introduction of sophisticated weapons systems that will enable Iran to open a new front against Israel and threaten freedom of navigation in the eastern Mediterranean" (Syria Study Group, 2019). According to Borshchevskaya (2020), disagreements among Russia and Iran rest on Russia's coordination with Israel in Syria, global competition in energy markets, outdated military equipment from Moscow, and the privileged status granted to Russian firms to exploit Syrian natural resources. Experts suggest that regime collapse would present challenges for Iran, and Russia, because of the resultant "instability and uncertainty that non-state actors hostile to Iran and Russia [could] exploit" (Hassan & Itani, 2020).

Regime Collapse Pressures and Outcomes

The chances that Iran and Russia would each leave their client regime to collapse are low. However, if the Syrian regime did collapse, the immediate environment would likely be chaotic, on all levels (economic, security, population protection, etc.). Moreover, chaotic circumstances and failures of governance are where non-state actors can operate effectively (Rabasa & Peters, 2007). The broad range of non-state actors still present in Syria would undoubtedly reactivate to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their influence and power.

Financial Crisis

A regime collapse could be the culmination of a long erosion of the regime's financial health. Sustained instability and conflict, along with heavy sanctions from the international community, has caused the value of the Syrian pound to plummet to one-tenth of its value since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 (Bulos, 2019). Currency speculation, lack of international investment, a decline in exports, and a general slowdown in economic activity, along with puzzling decisions made by the Central Bank of Syria, have also contributed to the disastrous state of the Syrian economy (Al-Khalidi, 2019; Mehcy, 2019). For many Syrians, these financial troubles are exacerbated by a precarious fiscal situation in neighboring Lebanon. Recent popular protests in Lebanon aimed at mismanagement of the country's coffers have resulted in strict financial controls across the country. As Bulos (2019) explains, the financial controls in Lebanon have "left millions of depositors stranded, among them Syrians

³ Russian military support for the Assad regime is not necessarily popular at home, however: one observer argues that there is fear that Syria may end up being this generation's Afghanistan for Moscow (i.e., a far-flung quagmire) (Borshchevskaya, 2020).

⁴ See Appendix A for Hassan & Itani's full response to this report's question of focus.

who have used Lebanon to circumvent far-ranging US and European Union sanctions” on the Assad regime. These activities also include remittances, which have been estimated to comprise up to 19% of total national revenue; Lebanon is the second-largest source of remittances to Syria (Advani & Al Nofal, 2019). These financial maneuvers, along with runaway inflation, has made the procurement of essential goods very difficult for Syrians, and led to projections of even further food and medicine shortages (Bulos, 2019). These already harsh economic conditions would be exacerbated in the event of a total regime collapse. One result could be a creation of a warlord economy typified by extortion, revenue collection through checkpoints, war profiteering, and looting (Yacoubian, 2020). The result would almost certainly be a further exodus of Syrians, and even greater strains on refugee-hosting nations, such as Turkey and Jordan.

Conflict Among Security Services

There are numerous state security services in Syria, each of which serves some nominally distinct purpose, but in actuality have overlapping missions, making for a complex web of authorities, all of which impinge on the lives of ordinary Syrians (Talaa, 2016; Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies & Syrian Expert House, 2013). These services often compete for resources and influence yet are nominally loyal to Assad (Talaa, 2016). Since the civil war began, however, the constellation of security services has expanded to include militias such as the Iranian-backed National Defense Forces and Russian private security companies (Al-Dassouky et al., 2019). Some militia commanders are nominally loyal to Assad but derive their primary support from other patrons (namely Iranian and Russian entities). Rival power centers could present cleavages within Assad’s inner circle if the regime is facing collapse (Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies & Syrian Expert House, 2013). In addition, the security services are plagued with profiteers, further highlighting the varying power centers within security elements in Syria. Indeed, “some militias that supported the state security agencies during the conflict have become increasingly independent, primarily pursuing their own economic and power interests” (Khatib, 2020). In what could perhaps be considered an effort to prevent such an outcome, Assad recently undertook a shake-up of his security services, further centralizing them under the control of himself and his Vice President of security affairs, Ali Mamlouk. Assad appears to be seeking a structure wherein the “security threads” of the rebuilt security structure “are linked only to the presidential palace and there is no greater Russian and Iranian leverage than currently exists” (Al-Ghadhawi, 2019).

Humanitarian Crisis

The Syrian people continue to suffer violent attacks by the regime, local militias, and international forces. They are vulnerable to arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Additionally, those remaining in Syria lack access to basic services like healthcare and safe water. Human Rights Watch (2019) reports that international humanitarian aid is being used as a weapon;⁵ it is reportedly being directed by the government to certain populations and denied to others that are perceived as adversaries. Moreover, the regime is using legislation, notably Law No. 10 enacted in April 2018, as a means of social control of political opponents.⁶

⁵ In January of 2020, Russia used its veto power on the United Nations Security Council to halve the number of border crossings where aid is delivered and compress the time frame allowed for aid deliveries (Associated Press, 2019).

⁶ According to Abu Ahmad (2018), Law No. 10 “allows the government to determine which areas of the country will be designated for reconstruction. According to the law, once the government selects an area for reconstruction, local authorities have a week to obtain a list of property owners from the area’s public real estate authorities and 45 days to submit this list. Law No. 10 stipulates that if a property owner does not appear on official documents, he or she has one year to provide proof of ownership after receiving notification that their property is in an area slated for ‘reconstruction.’ If the owner fails to provide proof, he or she will not be compensated for the loss and the ownership will be transferred to the province, town, or city in which the property is located” (Abu Ahmad, 2018).

Dubbed by experts as a “a legal veneer on Assad land grab,” this law represents a bad-faith effort by the regime to retake land left vacant by IDPs and refugees (Syria Study Group, 2019). Abu Ahmad (2018) reports that many fear that the goal of the regime is “to redistribute the properties of its Sunni citizens to Assad supporters and non-Syrian Shiite proxies, providing residences for Shiite forces and their families and thus making permanent their presence in the country.” These actions are continuing in an environment of limited governance and administration in Syria. As mentioned above, a regime collapse would inevitably bring about a chaotic economic system and exacerbate the regime’s failures to provide basic services and justice to its people (Itani & Hassan, 2019).⁷

Activation of Armed Groups and Stakeholders

The two most plausible scenarios if the Assad regime collapses are a Salafi-jihadi group assuming power in Damascus or an Iranian-style Shi’a militia filling the power vacuum (Yacoubian, 2020).⁸ A number of non-regime armed entities exert control over parts of Syria. While there are splits within each, for analytical purposes here they will be divided into four main groups: (1) Salafi jihadis, (2) Shi’a militias, (3) Turkish-supported militias, and (4) Kurdish elements. If a total regime collapse occurred, each of these groups would likely seek to expand its own territory and influence. This includes the forces who control Idlib (which are comprised of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [HTS] and non-jihadist opposition), Turkish elements in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas, and what remains of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Additionally, such a breakdown in order could activate dormant cells of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Further, the anarchic environment that would follow a collapse of the regime would likely feature a warlord economy, where strongmen are able to collect revenue and extort public goods to fund their operations.

Non-State Actors

Salafi-Jihadi Groups

There is a wide array of Salafi jihadi groups in Syria with overlapping objectives, patrons, areas of influence, and adversaries. Their opposition to the Assad regime is the common trait that allows for a group-level analysis. A few of these groups, namely ISIS and HTS, have controlled territory in different parts of Syria. However brutally and unpopularity, these groups have delivered some level of administration to areas that had been abandoned by the regime as a result of the fighting. Furthermore, these groups generally operate best in a disorderly situation—which is what the immediate days of a post-Assad regime Syria would look like (Yacoubian, 2020). HTS has generally been confined to Idlib and is administering governance therein (Syria Study Group, 2019). Additionally, ISIS remains powerful in Syria. To wit, “the group’s leadership is largely intact, maintains ‘excellent command and control capability’ in Syria, and is regrouping across the border in Iraq” (Syria Study Group, 2019).

⁷ At least “5.6 million have fled to neighboring countries, most of them between 2013 and 2016; 6.2 million people are internally displaced, some more than once, according to 2019 sources” (European Asylum Support Office, 2019).

⁸ Neither an Iranian-style Shi’a militia nor a Salafi-jihadi group assuming power in Damascus would be favorable from the Israeli perspective (Yacoubian, 2020). There remains a remote possibility for a third option that Israel would likely prefer. In this scenario, there could emerge a Russian-backed entity that is not entirely beholden to Iran. This would be complicated because of the advantage that Iran has on the ground, as opposed to Russian air superiority (Yacoubian, 2020). In the chaos that would follow a total regime collapse, Israel would likely continue their air strikes along the fringes of rebel-held territory in order to prevent the assumption of militias, independent of their sectarian affiliation.

Shi'a Militias

Another likely activated party in the chaos of a post-Assad Syria would be Shi'a militias, specifically those organized and supported by Iran. The Iranian government tends to operate most effectively with non-state institutions to achieve their objectives beyond their borders (Hassan & Itani, 2020). Iran and Hezbollah enjoy influence in areas of Syria around Damascus and the border with Lebanon (Hassan & Itani, 2020). The resolve of these entities (i.e., Iran and Hezbollah) to maintain influence and push back on a Salafi-jihadi usurpation of Syria would be very high, as an Assad regime collapse may represent an existential threat for Hezbollah (Yacoubian, 2020). Additionally, Iran has long sought a road to the Mediterranean, and may have secured an entrée to such an objective as a result of an agreement between the Iraqi and Syrian governments on a highway linking the two states (Rose, 2019). As such, Iran is strongly committed to the Assad regime, which has helped them secure this objective.

Beyond their ability to enforce some level of administration in a post-Assad environment, the Shi'a militants almost certainly would push back on Salafi-jihadi organizations fomenting chaos and seeking control in Damascus in order to protect their own economic and logistical interests, as discussed above. It is conceivable that some militias opposed to the Salafi-jihadist groups—not necessarily exclusively Shi'a—could coalesce along their opposition, not unlike how the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) organized in Iraq. However, questions remain about Iran's ability to organize such a loose confederation in order to maintain its advantage among on-the-ground elements. The Shi'a entities in Syria, though developed, do not have the administrative capability that they exercise in Iraq, so effectively governing larger territories would require a learning curve that Iran could probably hasten. Generally, Iran's capability to do more than what it is currently doing in Syria is an unanswered question, due in some part to the recent death of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani.

Turkish-Supported Elements

Turkey would also likely exploit the circumstances of a post-Assad environment to promote its groups, namely those former Free Syrian Army fighters in northeast Syria who have not yet been sent to Libya. Despite the undisciplined nature of these fighters, they have shown some semblance of governing ability, but only in the border areas (Afrin and the Euphrates Shield areas). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long identified Syria as a priority. One expert suggested that Erdoğan would push for a friendly Sunni entity on his southern border, as a manifestation of neo-Ottoman desires. In fact, because of his country's perception of the Kurds, even a Salafi jihadi entity in control would be preferable to a large autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria (Yacoubian, 2020). The Kurdish ties with Russia make their full-scale defeat at the hands of the Turks difficult to imagine. This is evidenced by Erdoğan's change in tone regarding Assad. Whereas earlier in the conflict, Erdoğan called for Assad's ouster, he has since come to accept the Russian position on the necessity of a political settlement. Further, Russia maintains some leverage over Turkey, specifically through the TurkStream pipeline, which was officially inaugurated in January 2020 (Borshchevskaya, 2020; Reuters & Haaretz, 2020).

Kurdish Elements

The Kurds in Syria would also be significant stakeholders in the event of a total regime collapse. Despite a challenging environment, the SDF has maintained some of its original presence, but faces a severe capability deficit in the absence of a resolution to the fighting in Syria (Lemmon, 2020). A regime collapse would imperil the fragile peace that the Kurds in the northeast are presiding over, because of the potential further incursion of Turkish forces and the general breakdown of order (Lemmon, 2020). A Russian-Turkish agreement in October

2019 resulted in a ceasefire of which Russia was the guarantor (International Crisis Group, 2019). In the scramble that would result post-Assad, it is unclear whether or not Russia would honor that commitment, particularly because Turkey would likely see that situation as an opportunity to deal with its fears about Kurdish autonomy.⁹

Conclusion

The situation in Syria remains complex. The Assad regime continues to maintain power, and barring an unforeseen scenario, it is well-positioned to hold its territory. However, a regime collapse could be brought upon by internal factors such as financial crisis and competing armed power centers. Such an outcome would trigger widespread fighting amongst different non-state and state actors, all of whom would seek to protect their influence, interests, and territory. Amidst this chaos, the Syrian people will continue to suffer, and will not be given reprieve from the years of horror that have been inflicted upon them. The combination of armed groups, proxies, and stakeholders with high resolve, along with the interests that remain at stake in Syria portend continued bloodshed, fighting, and disorder in Syria in the event of a regime collapse.

The United States' core interests in Syria are generally security-focused—they include defending the homeland and assets abroad from attack and maintaining sufficient regional stability to protect US interests and allies. There is a recognition that conflict in Syria will continue, regardless of the nature of US involvement, and that “significant US capabilities would be required to impose an opposition leadership over a unified Syrian state” (Astorino-Courtois, 2016a). The United States would be facing the realization of both of these phenomena in the event of an Assad regime collapse: continuing conflict and the necessity of a robust commitment to opposition figures. The recent decision by the United States to withdraw its forces from northeastern Syria demonstrates a willingness of the administration to scale back its commitment to Syria. If the conditions described above inherent with a regime collapse (i.e., warlordism, chaos, and both non-state and state actors doubling down on their positions) do come to fruition, in the short-term, the United States could either redeploy troops to protect installations in Syria or abdicate the space to emboldened actors on the ground. Notably, the cessation of this space would benefit Turkey, who see the settling of the Kurdish issue as an existential threat, Russia, who would see the protection of its interests, both security and economic, as a similar core interest to be protected, and violent extremist organizations, who will seek to exploit the resultant power vacuum.

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⁹ Beyond their use of militia elements, Turkey will likely further seek to exploit a power vacuum through its conventional statecraft as well. Operation Peace Spring, launched by the Erdoğan administration in October of 2019, was “an air and ground assault against Kurdish forces.” (Humud et al., 2019). The Turkish force was comprised of “airstrikes (fixed wing and UAV), artillery strikes, and direct fire from tanks on the Turkish side of the border.” (Humud et al., 2019). Some analysts point to the Turkish incursion as yet another data point that demonstrates Turkey's growing distance from the EU and the United States, particularly because it draws Turkey into closer coordination with Russia. (Stanicek, 2019). Turkey eventually agreed to a ceasefire with the United States, and also acceded to a memorandum of understanding with Russia in the wake of Operation Peace Spring (Zanotti & Thomas, 2019). In the event of a total regime collapse, Turkey will likely seek to expand on the territory it holds, and maintains by way of the aforementioned international agreements, thus disrupting the uneasy calm that persists today.

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Appendix A: Full Written Submission From Hassan Hassan and Faysal Itani

Authored by Hassan Hassan and Faysal Itani, Center for Global Policy, January 10, 2020

[A5] What would Syria look like with a total regime collapse? What leader / entity would take control if the regime collapses?

The collapse of the Syrian regime (distinct from the removal of Bashar Assad personally) would create opportunities for the regime's supporters and rivals alike, but would likely improve the Iranian and Turkish positions in Syria.

In addition to the strategic implications we would not expect the bureaucracy to survive a collapse of the political and military leadership. Therefore, Syria would see a serious deterioration in the state's administrative capabilities. In addition, public services and utilities would further deteriorate in efficiency and availability and the Syrian currency would collapse amid rapid capital outflows. Criminality and smuggling would accelerate driven by the rise of nonstate actors that arose during the war who, while nominally aligned with the state, would now operate under less constraints.

Strategic Impact

Syria is controlled by myriad armed groups and foreign military forces although some regions more tightly controlled than other. The regime has moderate to strong control over population and territory despite the ravages of the war, a weakened economy, and the influence of Iran and Russia. For that reason, its collapse would create a total strategic vacuum in those same areas where it is strongest and nonstate and foreign actors are constrained: The Damascus-Homs-Hama axis and to a lesser degree the northwestern mountain and coastal areas.

The actors best placed to fill this vacuum are Iran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah but also the more basic militias Iran has organized in a local or regional security capacity throughout the war. Of all major powers in Syria, Iran has the most experience in organizing proxies and its strategy (in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon alike) has been to organize structures parallel to the state but capable of infiltrating or coopting state institutions. Further Iran and Hezbollah already have an entrenched presence in key areas currently under nominal regime control including Damascus, the Damascus suburbs, the anti-Lebanon mountain that runs along the Damascus-Homs-Hama axis, and Aleppo. In some of the regime periphery Iran is dominant, such as in eastern Syria and parts of southern Syria. It is well-placed to encroach on and seize key regime territory, strategic assets, civilian infrastructure and institutions either directly or through local proxies.

Russia is the more powerful pro-regime state actor but would be less well-positioned to fill the gap created by regime collapse militarily or institutionally. The Russian strategy in Syria is based on exerting influence over and through the Syrian regime's political and military leadership, rather than on building parallel institutions that could plausibly control people and territory. Doctrine and experience would leave it at a disadvantage and likely focused on holding key military assets such as airbases and its naval resupply depot in Tartous.

Both Iran and Russia would be contending with a number of unconventional challenges from ISIS, other jihadist groups operating from Idlib and Hama provinces, regime-backed militias now unrestrained by the state, and insurgent groups already operating at low-intensity in southern Syria. Turkey and its proxies as well as Kurdish militants would take advantage of any regime weakness to seize territory adjacent to their own current areas, with the Aleppo and northeast areas coming under dispute.

Regime collapse would create temporary instability and uncertainty that nonstate actors hostile to Iran and Russia can exploit. It would also place a heavier burden on Iranian resources and personnel. However, if some stability is restored in regime areas the strategic balance may well favor forces currently backing Bashar Assad, if only because regime forces are not an irreplaceable component of the war effort and were in some cases a hindrance due to poor discipline, morale, and capability.