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## ISIS and Syria: A Joint US-Russian Assessment

*Dr Anthony Wells is Visiting Senior Research Fellow, King's College, London, Centre for Intelligence. Dr Andrey Chuprygin is Senior Lecturer, School of Asian Studies, National Research University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow.*

THE popular protests of the Arab Spring opened a Pandora's box of unrest in the Middle East. Rather than providing a transition from authoritarian regimes to Western-style liberal democracy, the Arab Spring upheavals contributed to shattering the economically and politically fragile systems of government in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, with disastrous consequences. Protestors had little capability to reform traditional institutions, and provided no alternatives to the ailing leaderships. A stark vacuum of moral authority resulted. Libya, Yemen, and Syria experienced de facto partitions. Yemen has become a theatre of a proxy war between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, divided between Houthi rebels in the north and al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the south, with no foreseeable resolution except to become partitioned. Since the NATO led involvement in 2011, Libya has devolved into an ungovernable patchwork of Islamic fiefdoms with impotent rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk, competing against each other for nominal political legitimacy while simultaneously engaging extremist groups, including ISIS.

In Libya and Yemen the social and economic structure has been completely destroyed after the total collapse of central governments. In Syria, however, the government of Bashar al-Assad has managed to survive in seriously jeopardised conditions with intense international controversy over who should have the unenviable task of governing Syria. If the lessons of political implosion in Libya and Yemen are to be absorbed, then the realities of a future post-Assad Syria should be assessed very carefully. Is it likely, for example, that the total collapse of the central government in Syria will directly facilitate the strengthening of ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates? The latter scenario may likely lead to the failure of political reform, and subsequently endanger the future democratic development of the region as a whole. Is there any logic, and on the ground political reality, in temporarily sustaining the government of Bashar al-Assad as a realistic means to eradicate radical Islamist insurgency? Does ISIS or the Bashar al-Assad regime present a greater threat to regional, and possibly even world, stability? Does a clear dictatorship provide any short-term benefits in the face of the ISIS threat? This is a daunting and non-trivial issue that has to be addressed head on.

The suggestion that Bashar al-Assad be included in a political resolution to the Syrian civil war is highly controversial. The Assad regime stands rightfully accused of committing human rights violations and keeping power tightly with the Alawite minority. The regime's close political ties to both Iran and Russia add complexity. Assad's response to the 2011 protests with force not only fuelled a rebellion, it also irreversibly delegitimised his rule. His supporters and allies would claim otherwise. Alleged human rights abuses are the focal point of opposition to Assad. The West has been accused of ambivalence, insofar as the US and its main allies championed the human rights issue in Syria while choosing simultaneously to be relatively silent in 2011 when confronted with the repression of Shiites in Bahrain. Analysts have pointed also to the West's support of el-Sisi's strict rule in Egypt, and Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. These apparent policy inconsistencies raise two objective questions: What differentiates the conduct of Damascus from that of Cairo and Riyadh? Why have there not been the calls for regime change in Manama? To ignore these ambiguities is perhaps to fly in the face of Middle East political realities, versus the perceived short-term benefits to the West.



The government of Damascus is dominated by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath party, an organisation with origins traceable to the founding of Syria in 1947. Baathism is an Arab nationalist ideology, authored by Christian Michel Aflaq, which advocates left-leaning populist economic reform, secularism, and anti-imperialism. From 1970-2000, Syria was ruled by Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite Syrian with an extensive military background. After a rapid rise within the Syrian Arab air force, Hafez al-Assad seized power. This was a remarkable accomplishment considering his Alawite status, as the impoverished Alawites had been traditionally subjected to sectarian discrimination by the rich Sunni Arab majority, the dominant social and economic elite in Syria. Understanding the minority status of Hafez al-Assad is crucial. By emphasising the role of the state in the formation of one's identity as opposed to religious affiliation or ethnic background, the sectarian climate of minority repression was supplanted by a united front of Arab nationalism and secularism. As a result, the Syrian population began to embrace a unified nationalist identity as opposed to the sectarian alternative that had dominated Syrian politics for centuries.

The al-Assad era witnessed unprecedented stability and economic development in Syria. This economic growth weathered the collapse of the Soviet Union, achieving rates of 7-8 per cent annual fiscal growth from 1991 to 1994. From the early 1990s until 2011, Syria played an active role in the international community, including assisting the United States in Operation DESERT STORM in 1991. The death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000 did not destabilise Syria. The transition of power from Hafez to his son, Bashar, was seamless. Baathist secularism guaranteed the protection, and thus earned the support, of religious minorities, including Druze, Shiite Muslims and Maronite Christians. This legacy of minority protection is reflected in the support lent to the Syrian government by Syrian Christians in the current civil war.

Sadly, this 'protection' eventually devolved into sectarian corruption, with members of the Sunni Arab majority often denied the economic/social mobility afforded to minority groups. The Assad family has traditionally relied heavily on the Alawite community to bolster regime security forces. This underlying sectarian divide erupted violently in March 2011. Many of the initial protestors were Sunni Muslims, and many of them were killed by regime security forces. The debate surrounding the conditions under which these killings took place has become highly politicised, but the brutality of Bashar al-Assad's response to these protests cannot be denied. Chronic Syrian instability is directly attributable to Assad's role, both in the current civil war as well as during the post-conflict reconstruction period. The key two questions today are: for Syrian security to be re-established and political reform implemented, must the Syrian regime decisively win the ongoing civil war? Second, is it an accurate assessment that all terrorist groups must be crushed and security re-established before any serious attempt at a political transition, including the retirement of Bashar al-Assad, can be made? These questions have to be answered.

Any political fallout following an Assad regime collapse would extend beyond the borders of Syria and further destabilise neighbouring countries. The wider impact of the Syrian civil war is exemplified by the refugee catastrophe that has gripped the region since 2011. The seemingly endless flow of refugees into neighboring Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Europe, is a tangible humanitarian symptom of this problem. Figures have progressively worsened each year since the war began. While anti-government forces have seized over 80 per cent of Syrian territory, the overwhelming majority of Syrian urban centers remain under government control, including 12 of Syria's 14 provincial capital cities. There are two provincial capitals completely outside regime control: Islamic State terrorists succeeded in seizing ar-Raqqah



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in 2013, while 'moderate' rebels fighting alongside the Al-Nusra Front wrestled away the provincial capital of Idlib in March of 2015. Should the major cities of Syria (Damascus, Homs, Deraa, Latakia and Tartous, to name a few) fall into the hands of ISIS, or their ideological brethren the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front, the consequences may be catastrophic.

Syria's rivals are primarily Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Israeli-Syrian tensions date back many years, with the countries having experienced intermittent conflict since 1967, when Israel annexed the Syrian Golan Heights by military force. Israel's occupation of Golan has not been recognised by international law, and has been condemned as illegitimate by the United Nations (UN Resolution 497) and the United States. Israel argues that the occupation remains for the purpose of protecting Israeli national security. Some argue that it continues because of the Golan's extensive petroleum reserves. Israel appears to have sided with the insurgency, or at least abstains from actively opposing it, likely as a means of eliminating its primary competitor for the Golan Heights and consolidating its occupation. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have offered materiel support to insurgent groups operating within Syria. The Syrian insurgency is not monolithic. The three most capable rebel groups are the Islamic State, the al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front, and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Absent from this list are the 'moderate' rebels, or the Free Syrian Army. The FSA has long since ceased to exist in an independent or militarily significant capacity. *The Guardian* newspaper reported as long ago as 2013 that FSA fighters often defect to Al-Nusra Front, and in large numbers. The United States' policy of backing the 'moderate' rebels appears equivocal, since there is an inconsequential amount of moderates to support.

Syria has a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In 2003 Syria drafted legislation calling for universal weapons of mass destruction (WMD) disarmament in the Middle East. Israel's critics have claimed that this resolution was stonewalled due to Western support for Israel. Israel has refused to sign arms control treaties designed to stem the proliferation of WMDs. Israel is one of five UN member states that has not yet ratified the CWC (Chemical Weapons Convention), with North Korea, South Sudan, Egypt and Angola. Syria held unprecedented multi-candidate presidential elections during the summer of 2014. These elections were held despite the ongoing wartime climate. Analysts agree that the viability of the opposition candidates remained questionable at best. These elections were the first pluralistic presidential elections in Syrian history, and were endorsed by an international monitoring group.

The Syrian regime is the antithesis of modern civilised government. It is abhorrent to educated societies. However, is it nevertheless a short-term, pragmatic, and viable alternative to Al-Nusra, or the rapidly advancing Islamic State? Neither ISIS nor Al-Nusra are likely to hold elections of any kind, join the international community, or adopt international arms control treaties such as the CWC. The next President of the United States, and key allies such as the United Kingdom, will have to face these intractable dilemmas. They need to make hard and fast decisions about the way ahead before Syria implodes into a deeper and tragic downward spiral beyond even the current level of suffering and crimes against humanity.

DR ANTHONY WELLS  
DR ANDREY CHUPRYGIN

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