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Western Policy towards Syria: Ten Recommendations

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SUMMARY

In the face of the mounting crisis in Syria over the past two and a half years, Western governments (primarily those of the United States, United Kingdom and France) have oscillated between explicit demands for President Bashar al-Assad to leave and implicit acceptance of him as a viable partner in UN-brokered peace negotiations. During this time, they have moved from considering military intervention to including al-Assad in the Geneva II meeting, tentatively scheduled for January 2014, following his agreement to surrender Syria's chemical weapons in September.

Western positions have thus not been as consistent as those expounded by the main supporters of the Syrian government (primarily Russia and Iran). In parallel, but not directly linked to negotiations, Western governments have taken the lead in coordinating humanitarian efforts for up to half of the Syrian population, which is now in urgent need of assistance.

This paper seeks to inform a more strategic approach to the overall Western response to the crisis in Syria and its immediate neighbourhood. It argues that a more effective Western strategy must be based on moving away from the simplified popular depiction of the conflict as primarily sectarian and religiously based. Such a strategy needs to involve clearer objectives, including ending violence, minimizing killing, and preventing state collapse. It also needs to be targeted at the areas where the West has leverage, and move beyond the focus on uniting the opposition under the umbrella of the Syrian National Coalition, to engage with a broader swathe of Syrian opinion.

This paper makes the following ten recommendations for Western governments:

1. Identify clearer objectives and prioritize what matters most in Syria.
2. Safeguard the integrity of the state and what remains of civil society.
3. Focus on areas where there is leverage.
4. Engage with a wider set of Syrian actors.
5. Engage more broadly with civil society.
6. Identify areas for common ground between key players.
7. Plan for reforming post-conflict security institutions.
8. Think about how to guarantee post-conflict security.
9. See the UN as more than a humanitarian and coordinating agency.
10. Avoid seeing the crisis primarily through a sectarian lens.

BACKGROUND

This paper draws on research and policy briefings carried out by the authors, on discussions held by a wide range of Chatham House experts, and on the work of the Syria Study Group (SSG), an expert-level discussion series that has been run by the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at Chatham House since December 2011. It has also been informed by related MENA Programme research on the underlying drivers of the Arab uprisings, including political economy factors; on the politics of sectarianism in the region; and on the foreign policies of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the Gulf states.

MENA Programme researchers provide regular comment and analysis on Syria and on the regional and international ramifications of the conflict there, and are currently developing a stream of work on the topic of 'Syria and its Neighbours', focusing on the conflict's economic, political and humanitarian impact across the region. The underlying thinking behind the recommendations has been elaborated in a number of articles and analysis by the authors, which are listed at the end of the paper. For more information, please visit www.chathamhouse.org/syria. More information about MENA Programme research can be found at: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/research/middle-east>.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been clear that the only sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria is a political one. But the calls for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, and for military action, followed by an about-turn in the face of public and parliamentary opposition in the United Kingdom, the United States and France, has allowed the Syrian regime to see the change of approach as a sign of Western weakness rather than wisdom. The Western-backed elements of the opposition are also in disarray. The Assad regime has always portrayed itself as a force for stability against foreign-backed terrorism, even when it faced a purely peaceful, local uprising. The militarization, radicalization and sectarianization of the conflict have played into its hands, even though the true dimensions of the conflict in different locations are increasingly locally defined.

The armed jihadist components within the internal opposition movement are now estimated at 10,000–12,000 men, but their actions tend to be opportunistic or tactical rather than posing a strategic threat to the Syrian government. Despite recent Saudi-led attempts to coordinate military opposition efforts among anti-Al-Qaeda forces,¹ there have also been reports suggesting that jihadist strongholds have been spared attack by the Syrian armed forces. Indeed, the government's local and international attempts to legitimize itself have benefited from the vastly distorted but increasingly widespread perception that it is primarily fighting Al-Qaeda and related ideologically motivated groups. Local insights from UN personnel, locally based journalists and foreign aid workers paint a very different picture: one of a conflict coloured increasingly by divisions, disinformation, criminality, the kidnappings of foreigners for profit, and of local and international fighters moving between armed groups on the basis of access to resources, rather than a coherent or coordinated strategy to fight the Assad regime.

It is thus vital to look beyond the falsely simplistic binaries presented by much international media, which depict the only options as being a victory for Assad or Al-Qaeda and see the conflict as fundamentally religious. The opposition cannot win militarily against a national army backed by powerful state and non-state allies (Iran, Russia, Hezbollah and Iraqi militants). Arming the opposition is no solution to the conflict when local circumstances now more often take precedence over national resistance to the Assad regime. But even a mediated ceasefire and international transition agreement will require some sort of international enforcement.

The following ten recommendations summarize new ways in which Western states should refocus their attention and policy. They are designed to avoid the traps of the previously flawed analyses of the core challenges, which have resulted in actions that have undermined the emergence of a sustainable strategy towards Syria over the past two-and-a-half years.

Given the rapidity of interrelated developments on the ground and the increasing internationalization and externalization of the Syrian crisis, this paper argues that securing the future integrity of the Syrian state and the fabric of its civil society is essential, and should be accorded a high priority in efforts to reorient Western policy initiatives towards a strategically coherent set of outcomes.

1. IDENTIFY CLEARER OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIZE WHAT MATTERS MOST IN SYRIA

Western governments are sending mixed messages because they have confused objectives in relation to Syria, including humanitarian impulses, conflict resolution, conflict containment, regime change for strategic gain, counter-terrorism, chemical weapons destruction and non-proliferation. Not only are these objectives contradictory, they are also coloured by wider regional and international considerations that fail to concentrate on priorities that are both realizable and necessary for the longer-term stability and recovery of Syria. Problems of international significance will continue with or without Assad's departure or regime change, but the collapse of Syria would

¹ See Yezid Sayigh, 'Unifying Syrian Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray' (ISN ETH Zurich, 5 November 2013), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail?lng=en&id=172128>.

affect the immediate region for years to come. It is thus important to focus on priority objectives for Syria first, and relate the role and influence of external actors directly towards achieving these.

2. SAFEGUARD THE INTEGRITY OF THE STATE AND WHAT REMAINS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

One clear objective should be to safeguard the integrity of the Syrian state and what remains of Syrian civil society. The immediate focus should be on joint humanitarian-political goals: ending violence, minimizing killing and preventing state collapse. Here, there is some opportunity to build an international consensus. On the other hand, focusing solely on Western priorities such as strengthening US credibility, or on shared Western and Gulf objectives to limit Iran's broader regional influence, has little relation to the interests of Syrians and inevitably creates a backlash from the other international or regional powers involved. While the first priority needs to be reducing violence, a sustainable solution will also require the factors that led to the uprising and the conflict in the first place to be addressed. These factors include the lack of avenues to negotiate non-violent political change and the long-term repression of all organized opposition, as well as corruption and conflicting economic and political interests.

3. FOCUS ON AREAS WHERE THERE IS LEVERAGE

Western governments have little leverage with regime players in Syria, except for their ability to provide incentives for defectors (which has had limited success to date). They have more leverage with the backers of the regime, Russia and potentially now Iran, each of which has an international agenda that goes well beyond Syria and that may allow for trade-offs. The position of China should also be explored further: it has long-standing relations with the Syrian regime, and Beijing has joined Moscow in opposing humanitarian intervention through the UN, in line with its general opposition to such interventions. But China also wants to maintain good relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies and Iran, its two key sources of oil.

Governments that have backed the opposition – such as the 'London 11'² – have some leverage with the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC), but the opposition is increasingly seeing its Western allies as less reliable than its Gulf backers, and many among its numbers suspect the West of preparing for a deal that will keep Assad in power. The setting in November 2013 of a new date for the Geneva II talks, so soon after the announcement of an interim international deal on Iran's nuclear programme, has added to opposition concerns that Syrian interests will be relegated to a lower priority than the international non-proliferation agenda (both on Iran and on Syria's chemical weapons) and the desire of the United States in particular to reach a longer-term accommodation with Iran. Western governments – especially those of the United States, United Kingdom and France – also have leverage with the Gulf countries and Turkey, which are now the main external backers of the opposition. However, the close working relationship between the United States, United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia on Syria has been damaged by the debate over possible military action in September 2013, a situation exacerbated by differences over Iran, while Turkey's relations with the Gulf countries have suffered from their diametrically opposed policies towards Egypt.

The Geneva II talks may be more effectively used to secure agreement between the main international players to stop escalating and fuelling conflict in Syria, or to come up with a mechanism to enforce an eventual truce between Syrian actors, than to resolve the differences between the local players over the parameters within which a transition agreement might be negotiated. Given the difficulties of convening a representative group of Syrians in an international forum in the short timeframe available, the energy of the international community might be better deployed towards reducing its own collective impact on the spread of violence in Syria.

² The London 11 comprises Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. See 'London 11' press release, 22 October 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-11-meeting-on-syria>.

4. ENGAGE WITH A WIDER SET OF SYRIAN ACTORS

Syria's diverse opposition needs a wider range of representatives at the international negotiating table than the SNC alone. But the search by Western governments for a unified opposition front that is broadly representative and acceptable to the West has proved to be a chimera. There are two main reasons for the repeated failure of attempts to foster such a unified umbrella movement with a clear policy vision.

First, the opposition to the Assad regime, both formal and informal, is fundamentally decentralized and its legitimacy is often localized. In seeking a precedent for what was expected to coalesce as a parallel national opposition body in Syria, Western governments were impressed with the relative unity shown by Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), yet the NTC has not stood the test of time in terms of securing a more enduring legitimacy on the ground in Libya.

Second, access to resources and the management of expectations have been difficult. The 'London 11' and the Friends of Syria that preceded it have provided operating budgets for the Syrian National Council (which was later succeeded by the Syrian National Coalition) to function outside Syria, but this has not been matched by concomitant funding lines or the establishment of relevant mechanisms for the SNC to secure legitimacy and credibility among opposition groups within the country.

The objective of opposition unity is an elusive one; a more viable option than trying to strengthen the hand of a particular pro-Western side would be to focus on coordinating the diversity of opposition opinion towards the common goal of maintaining the viability of a future Syria.

5. ENGAGE MORE BROADLY WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Rather than searching for individual leaders, such as a potential prime minister-in-waiting, Western efforts would be better spent working out a transition plan that would be palatable to as much of Syrian society as possible – with the immediate focus being on a ceasefire. Leaders should emerge from within a new set of processes that link internal dialogue within Syrian networks to a broader basis for national agreement, even if such an agreement consists only of an initial commitment to safeguarding the integrity of the state. Leaders encouraged to participate in such processes are likely to lose local legitimacy if identified and selected by external powers. Rather, the role of the latter should be to facilitate exchanges within and between a new set of consultative networks, to be constructed and designed by Syrian exiles and internal activists. Formal talks should be accompanied by 'Track Two' work involving a broader swathe of Syrian civil society and community leaders. With seven million displaced persons, two million of whom are refugees, the future of Syria now lies in large part outside the country. Options may include working with those recently exiled in Beirut and Amman, and facilitating more focused contacts within shared professions and interest groups, with a view to keeping civil society functioning before the fragile remaining links between exiled and internally displaced Syrians are completely broken.

6. IDENTIFY AREAS FOR COMMON GROUND BETWEEN KEY PLAYERS

The international and regional diplomatic efforts of Western governments should focus on identifying areas for common ground between key players, including Syria's neighbours (which are hosting most of the refugees, or, as in the case of Israel, at risk from the overspill of conflict) and the main backers of the regime (Russia and Iran) and the opposition (Turkey, the Gulf states and the West). Areas of consensus may include preventing Syria from becoming a haven for jihadi militants, preserving state institutions, and stabilizing the situation and reducing violence sufficiently to end the refugee crisis and enable some refugees to return. While sectarian rhetoric and loyalties have been instrumentalized by various players, there are also many in the wider region – including influential clerics – who recognize the extreme dangers of the current levels of sectarian

radicalization and who could be engaged in peace efforts, including those aimed at the protection of shrines.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have the most leverage over the internal armed opposition groups and will thus be key players in any attempt to bring different factions to the table. While their Western allies have some reservations over their choices of opposition groups to back and consequently have provided more 'stop-start' and less reliable support, the Gulf states and Turkey have gained influence by being consistent in delivering money and arms. The Gulf states, however, generally have not been seen as credible backers of democracy or of demands for a more representative state, while minorities in Syria have been sceptical of the risk of external governments supporting sectarian agendas.

As being financial heavyweights and major trade markets, Turkey and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, have leverage that could be used in possible agreements with Iran and Russia, as has been highlighted by recent reports of bilateral outreach. To encourage them to work in parallel with Western priorities, above all towards a commonly discussed and agreed set of goals to safeguard the integrity of the Syrian state, Western governments will need to accord more importance to the concerns they have already expressed. One set of concerns relates to the role of the UN (symbolized above all by Saudi Arabia's recent refusal to take up its place on the UN Security Council) and another to the intended outcomes of the current P5+1 negotiations with Iran. Iraq may also need to be brought into a basic regional consensus over the importance of preventing the fall-out from Syria from destabilizing the region more than it has done already.

While Iran is currently likely to view its ally as having the upper hand, its own involvement in Syria has been costly. Its role has precluded it from striking new alliances with Arab uprising movements and with the Muslim Brotherhood. It has also cost it – at least for now – its alliance with Hamas, and exacerbated popular perceptions in the broader Middle East that Iran's foreign policy has a sectarian agenda. Iran may therefore have its own interests in seeking a solution in Syria, but will be focused on defending its access to Hezbollah and preventing Syria from being a base for attacks on itself or on its allies in Iraq. There is a risk that it may seek to maintain some paramilitary presence or proxies as an insurance policy.

7. PLAN FOR REFORMING POST-CONFLICT SECURITY INSTITUTIONS

Reforming the army and security institutions in any post-conflict Syria, many members of which will have been involved in fighting with the rebels, will pose a serious challenge and thus needs to be planned for. The badly managed disbanding of the army in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 has made many in the region wary of dismantling such institutions altogether. Russia and Iran, which have a close working relationship with these institutions, will necessarily play a key role in this.

There are a number of best-practice examples from previous conflict situations, from the Balkans and beyond, that could inform planning towards this end. Understanding the interrelated roles of the Syrian military and security apparatus prior to 2011 and the ways in which the current conflict has transformed the roles of its component parts are both essential to planning ahead for its reform, as well as identifying the most appropriate external actors to assist in a coordinated transition period within Syria itself.

8. THINK ABOUT HOW TO GUARANTEE POST-CONFLICT SECURITY

Western governments, and especially those of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, need to start thinking about how security would be guaranteed in any post-conflict Syria, as this is likely to be the key to any successful negotiated transition. Any agreement on a future transition process raises serious enforcement questions. Deploying a UN peacekeeping contingent is a possibility in the interim, but will require a prior agreement between opposing sides represented on the UN Security Council that it is in their collective interest to push for reducing and controlling the spread of violence. In what would be a very dangerous environment, further consideration will be needed over which countries would be

willing to commit troops. One option might be to consider deploying troops from states seen as more friendly to the respective sides to play a coordinated role across the different regions of Syria. Encouraging, say, Pakistan and/or Turkey to take up a presence in rebel-held areas and India and/or Brazil in regime areas would be one such approach.

9. SEE THE UN AS MORE THAN A HUMANITARIAN AND COORDINATING AGENCY

In order to reach this stage, Western governments, and the international community as a whole, also need to see the UN's role as more than just delivering humanitarian assistance. A fresh examination is needed of what the UN's previous experiences of conflict management and reduction can offer in terms of best practice to maintain the social and economic networks required to keep a post-conflict Syrian state viable and intact. Part of the problem has been the deficit of international actors that can credibly claim to be working for the self-determination of the Syrian people, and this is where more neutral nations might be encouraged to play a role. The provision of humanitarian aid and international funding for the refugee crisis have also been managed in parallel to and de-linked from international diplomatic efforts to address the core conflict so far. Without prejudicing the neutrality of the international aid effort, the protection of aid workers and access to communities in need within Syria and neighbouring countries has to be seen as part of an overall strategy to identify and reduce interrelated causes of violence and insecurity. This includes attempts to combat the spread of criminal activity, which now encompasses the kidnapping of foreigners for ransom.

10. AVOID SEEING THE CRISIS PRIMARILY THROUGH A SECTARIAN LENS

Western governments should avoid falling into the trap of seeing the Syria crisis primarily through a sectarian lens. While the conflict remains *implicitly* sectarian, the *explicit* sectarianism of the Iraqi civil war or the Bosnia war has not yet been reached, and many Syrians continue to reject the sectarianization pursued by radical rebel groups and by cynical elements of the regime. The international debate over Syria often depends on overly simplistic narratives of what is an extremely complex, multi-layered and constantly evolving conflict. Reporting on Syria is complicated by the significant variations in the situation in different areas and over time, and by a problem of information overload compounded by propaganda and misinformation. Many organizations have fallen victim to the carefully structured narratives of the Assad regime. This has depicted the threats it claims to be facing as foreign-backed jihadism and the external manipulation of sectarian and religious differences that enjoyed little political traction in Syria before the conflict. Western states should be clear that their own interests are best served by focusing on the needs of Syrians themselves, rather than allowing partial successes (such as the dismantling of the regime's chemical weapons programme) to obstruct a level-headed assessment of events on the ground.

If its objectives are not clearly articulated and acted on, the West may end up loathed and mistrusted by all sides in Syria. Western governments, especially the US administration, are already being blamed for fuelling or failing to resolve the conflict, and local perceptions of US leverage tend to be out of proportion to America's perceptions of its own leverage. There must be an appropriate balance between the internal and external factors in seeking to resolve the conflict. Most agree that a solution cannot be found without the external patrons of the warring factions reaching some kind of agreement. Equally, these factions are sufficiently independent that they cannot merely be forced into an agreement. Thus, on the basis of a clear-sighted and locally informed analysis of the conflict and the interests that continue to drive it, locally and internationally, it is essential to address the original underlying factors and grievances if any agreement is to hold. Having realized that their predictions of Assad's early departure were wrong, Western governments are at risk of swinging too far in the opposite direction, and prioritizing a return to a former 'stability' represented by Assad – which in reality contained the seeds of its own downfall. Opting for this false promise of stability will only damage Western interests in the region over the longer term, where demands to hold the Assad regime to account for a death toll already in excess of 120,000 citizens will eventually mount.

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