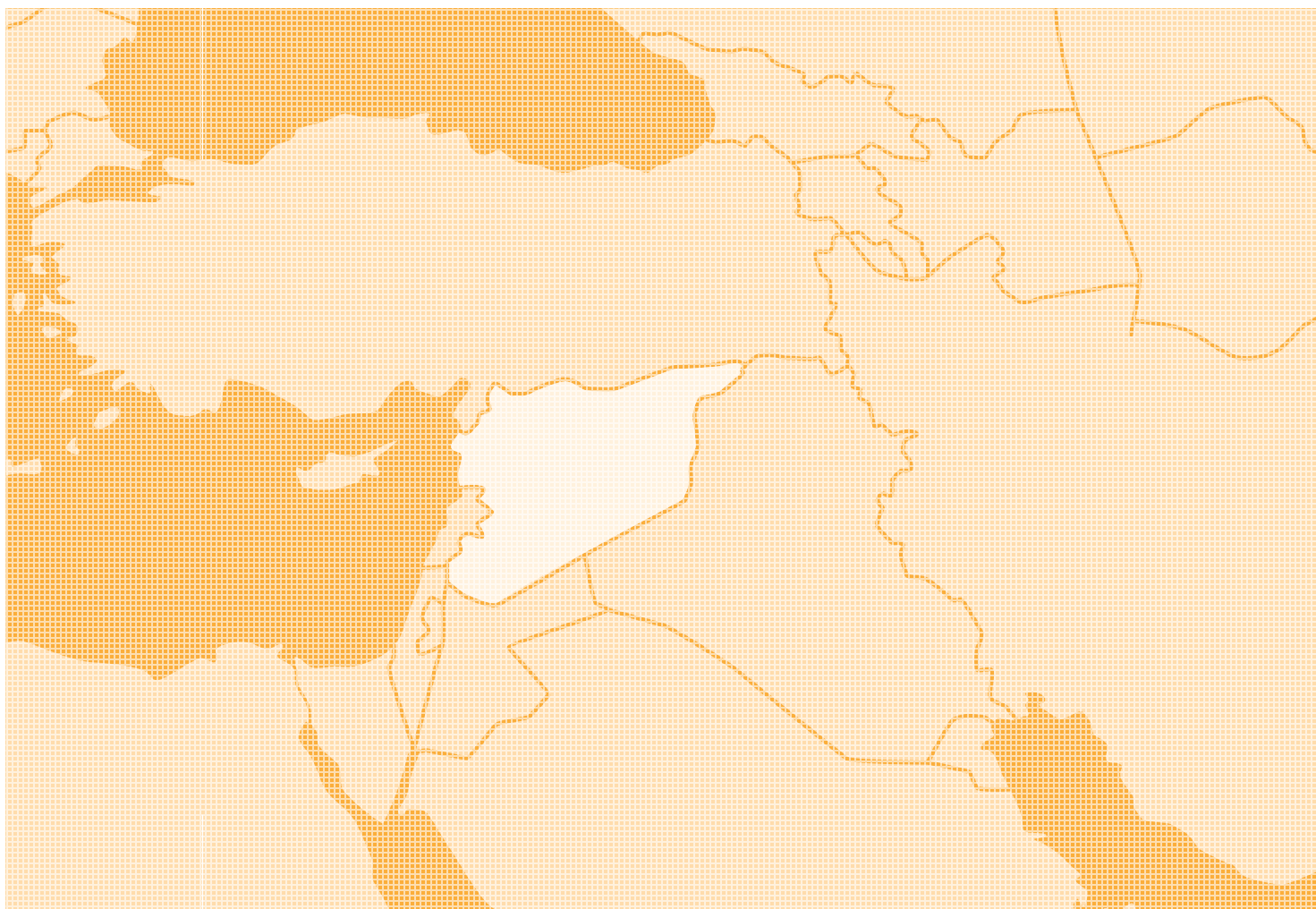


Obstacles to a Resolution of the Syrian Conflict

Primary Author: David W. Lesch

Contributing Authors: Frida Nome, George Saghir, William Ury and Matthew Waldman



Harvard-NUPI-Trinity Syria Research Project
[Final Report]

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Executive Summary

This is the final report of the Harvard-NUPI-Trinity Syria Research Project (HNT). The project is sponsored by Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (or NUPI, Oslo, Norway), and Trinity University (San Antonio, Texas, USA).

The project's research parameters include interviewing a wide range of individuals and officials who are involved in the Syrian conflict with similar sets of questions. We have gathered a database of information on and general impressions of the Syrian conflict. This information could be useful in creating a foundation for a potential conflict resolution outcome, and we have recommended ways forward.

The HNT became operational in December 2012 and ended operationally in early September 2013. We drew up a detailed interview protocol to guide all of our interviews with essentially the same basic set of questions asked of all those who we interviewed. We began our interviews in mid-December 2012 with a trip to Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey, where the research team extensively interviewed 27 leading figures from a broad spectrum of the internal Syrian opposition. We did not interview members of Jabhat al-Nusra or any other groups labeled as jihadist, although several of those we interviewed identified themselves as salafist who had on occasion fought with jihadist groups. We have since December 2012 interviewed a number of leading exiled leaders of the Syrian opposition in London, Paris, Beirut, and Cairo. We have also interviewed leading British, French, American, Russian, Saudi Arabian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Egyptian, Turkish, Israeli officials, and, importantly, we interviewed Syrian government officials in and outside of Damascus. In addition, we have interviewed officials from non-state actors such as the United Nations, the League of Arab States, Hizbullah, Hamas, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and some NGO officials, community leaders, and journalists engaged in and/or covering the conflict in Syria. Despite our efforts, we have not been able to interview Iranian or Qatari officials and a few others, the possible reasons for which are detailed in the Introduction.

The HNT team leaders generated this project because they believe that no one was really taking the necessary time to understand and analyze the various different views toward and opinions of the conflict from the wide variety of players on all sides who have a stake in the situation in Syria. First and foremost our mission has been to listen and learn. The primary objective has been to understand the conflict from the conceptual paradigms of the individuals, officials, groups, and governments involved in the conflict. The project team leaders believe that only when all of the various viewpoints and perspectives are taken into account can proper analysis begin. The sets of responses and accompanying comparative analysis will not only enhance our understanding of the dynamics of the Syrian conflict but also enable an exploration of potential conflict resolution outcomes.

General Conclusions from Interviews

- 1) It is clear from the comprehensive sets of interviews conducted by the project team that there is anything but one over-arching narrative that describes the course of events of the Syrian uprising and conflict. No one has a complete handle on what is going on in an ever-changing and evolving – and more complicated – conflict that has domestic, regional and international dimensions. As one European diplomat told us, there are two wars: the real war being fought on the ground and an information war being fought on the airwaves, in the print media, and maybe most importantly in the social media. The information war has greatly complicated our understanding of the war on the ground, especially as the Syrian government, in the view of many, has been consistently losing the information war even while its military fortunes on the ground ebb and flow.
- 2) Respondents' views of the origins of the Syrian uprising offer some interesting insights. There was at least a broad level of concurrence on all sides that there were socio-economic reasons that created a fertile environment for unrest. Almost everyone interviewed, however, and most importantly the Syrian opposition, were certain that the uprising would never have occurred unless the so-called Arab spring had taken place in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. This created huge expectations that what happened in these countries, i.e. the removal of long-entrenched regimes and/or rulers due to popular protests or an armed rebellion/revolution, could be replicated in Syria. From the viewpoint of the internal Syrian opposition, perhaps the single biggest cause for the uprising in a long term sense was the perceived assault on an individual's dignity by elements or representations of the Syrian government. At some point, in other words, a person had felt humiliated in some fashion, often most dramatically by arrest and torture by the Syrian government's security services, but also it had to do with the endemic corruption they endured in their lives as well as what they believed was a systemic lack of opportunity because others with links to or somehow favored by the regime received more beneficial treatment and rewards. It was and continues to be a driving force in the protests, in the decision to take up arms, and maintaining the fight against government forces.
- 3) A number of critical mistakes were made by many parties to the conflict at the beginning stages of the uprising. It appears from interviewing a number of Syrian officials close to President Bashar that he as well as at least some of his inner circle vacillated (between being conciliatory or defiant) over how to respond to the initial protests following the incident at Deraa in March 2011 and before his first address to the nation on the issue on March 30th. Of course, we all know that the Syrian president ultimately adopted the more defiant approach and blamed the uprising on conspiracies hatched by Syria's foreign enemies and terrorists, which has remained the public mantra to this day. The indecision in the beginning suggests that there may be elements still in the Syrian hierarchy that have a more moderate view toward the conflict and the opposition; however, the choice of a more harsh response to and crackdown of the protests may have been an attempt by more hard line elements within the government – or at least this was the unintended result – to force out or marginalize many of these moderate elements. Judging from the respondents comments, it seems the security forces got in the last and decisive word to Assad, i.e. they convinced the leadership that they could quell the uprising and defeat the rebels in a matter of weeks. It was more a convulsive, business

as usual response by hard line elements. Of course, the regime greatly underestimated the resiliency and determination of the opposition.

- 4) We believe that the acceleration on both sides toward militarization of what began as largely peaceful demonstrations turned an uprising into an armed conflict and ultimately a civil war. From the point of view of Damascus, there had been conspiracies long in place against the Asad regime, mainly from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar due to a deterioration in relations following disagreements on the issue of Iran and differences on leadership questions in Iraq and Lebanon. The regime's view of the world is one in which its traditional enemies quickly jump at the opportunity to weaken Syria, even to the point of removing Asad from power. It sees the events of the Arab spring as having created just such an opportunity, so from the very beginning there were powerful elements who, perhaps, minimized the socio-economic reasons for the unrest and adopted a defensive (some might say paranoid) posture poised to engage in a fight rather than address the demands of the opposition, which they generally saw as pawns being manipulated by Syria's foreign enemies. From the Syrian government point of view, as a result, the uprising was militarized from the very beginning, thus the necessity for a similar response. The opposition generally believes it was well into 2012 before the uprising turned militant.
- 5) The opposition, in general, also made some critical errors. First and foremost was their incorrect assumption (as many in the West and its regional allies thought) that the Syrian regime would fall in a relatively short period of time. The opposition (and a number of countries, such as Turkey, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia) also made a significant mistake in assuming the United States would adopt a more assertive role in militarily backing the fight against the Syrian government. The opposition in general failed to understand how much the United States had shifted its position on military intervention following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with more focus on domestic issues by an administration that came to power in the throes of an economic crisis. The Libyan example was cited frequently by many parties to the Syrian conflict as a likely template for Syria, but it was wrong on many counts, including an understanding of the Russian position amid shifts in their leadership and their interest in maintaining support for the Syrian government. As a result, there has been a great deal of disappointment – even anger – against the West and particularly the United States in opposition circles (and bewilderment over US policy in many officials circles in the West and in the region) for a perceived lack of support – and to some, a feeling of betrayal.
- 6) The response of almost everyone we interviewed was that in no way did they think that the Syrian conflict would last as long as it has. A number mentioned that the unrest in Syria rose to a new level in June 2011. We concur. A defining moment may have occurred in the northern Syrian town of Jisr al-Shugur, near the Turkish border. It was here when the Syrian army decided to attack the town to punish those who were behind the massacre of over one hundred soldiers and security officers who had been stationed there. As news of Jisr al-Shugur spread throughout the country, the opposition began to adopt a much more militant tone and posture that expanded over the next year into an all-out conflict.

- 7) Most of those interviewed have come to the conclusion that the conflict has reached a virtual stalemate. Either side in the short term at least (and barring any change in the military equation on the battlefield) cannot inflict a knockout blow on the other – not even close. And both sides know it for the most part. Many believe the conflict as it now stands may continue for another five to ten years barring some sort of political settlement. In this sense, it may be a mutually destructive stalemate.
- 8) As a result of the stalemate, the conflict has also become more radicalized, with more and more extremist elements in both camps playing a pivotal role in setting military policy and determining diplomatic options. Respondents on both sides blame the West and its regional allies for extending the conflict to the point where it has become much more sectarian. This has opened the door for Islamist extremists and jihadist groups to enter the fray and assume a disproportionately influential position compared to their (unknown and perhaps exaggerated) numbers but due primarily to their military experience and prowess. However, the opposition blames the West for not doing enough to end the conflict sooner, thus creating an opportunity for extremist groups to fish in troubled waters. The Syrian government, on the other hand, blames the West and its regional allies for prolonging the conflict due to their extensive support given to the Syrian opposition. This has complicated efforts by various parties outside of Syria to find, much less organize, a representative opposition negotiating partner with which there are common goals in terms of the future of Syria.
- 9) The biggest concern among the respondents from all sides was the continuing disintegration of the Syrian state, and that pretty soon there may be a point of no return (if it has not already been reached) in terms of saving the country from total breakdown. In other words, unless there is a decisive victory by one side or the other in the short term (which, in any event, may destroy the country during the process of winning decisively) or some sort of political settlement, the retreat of government authority combined with the fragmentation of opposition groups will generate a territorial mass governed by warlords and their militias (a la Somalia), with borders virtually dissolved between Syria and its neighbors, causing more instability in those countries. Partition, i.e. distinct ethnic or sectarian zones with fairly defined borders is too pretty of a term to be applied to what lies ahead for Syria in the opinion of most respondents. It is more likely to dissolve into chaos, potentially accompanied by large scale revenge killings or even ethnic cleansing in attempts to create a more defined sectarian or ethnic sub-state.
- 10) The fragmentation of the opposition in general and the lack of unity in the internal opposition, the external opposition, and in the relationship between the internal and external opposition was identified by all parties interviewed as a major concern and a significant detriment to the chances of the opposition gaining a military victory or presenting themselves as a viable negotiating partner in any sort of process that may lead to a political settlement.
- 11) The Syrian government leadership sees no credible options other than continuing the fight. To them, nothing viable has been offered, especially as most parties who are arrayed against the Syrian government insist on Bashar al-Asad being removed from power before, during, or soon after a transition period – with, of course, many still in

the opposition committed to removing him by force. Why should it commit to a process whose end result is to put it out of business? As such, the Syrian government seems to have pulled out all the stops in order to survive, having employed what many believe to be questionable military tactics and embraced high levels of support from Iran, Russia, and Hizbullah, thus regionalizing and internationalizing an internal conflict as Syria has become a multi-dimensional proxy battleground.

- 12) Most sides at this point in the Syrian government and in the opposition (with the possible exception of opposition jihadist groups) prefer a political settlement of some sort to end the conflict. A rising number in the opposition have become disillusioned with the course of events in recent months. Many Syrians on all sides are looking more and more to a solution that ends the war sooner rather than later and a return to normalcy. Most sides agree that some sort of transition will have to take place that results from a negotiated settlement, from that which exists today in terms of the Syrian political system to something else at the end of a transition period. There are dramatic differences between the opposition and the Syrian government on the nature, timing, and ultimate result of such a transition, one of the major differences having to do with the role Bashar al-Asad could or should play, if any.
- 13) One of the problems that some of the respondents have pointed out is that without an international consensus on the issue or, in the view of the opposition, leadership from the West (especially the United States), the proliferation of parties working on and paths leading to a negotiated settlement have occurred. There has also emerged different regional and international players with sometimes competing agendas working with different elements of the opposition, thus contributing to more of a fracturing rather than a coalescing of the opposition.
- 14) A serious mistake made by the international community in dealing with the opposition is that it pursued from the beginning an outside-in strategy rather than an inside-out strategy. For the most part, the West misidentified who the leaders of the internal Syrian opposition were by relying too much on hearsay as well as the instruments of the social media. By adopting an outside-in approach, similar to what happened in Iraq with the exiled opposition community, the anti-Asad coalition in the international community first wasted valuable time that could have been spent supporting efforts to unify the internal opposition and facilitate the connection with external opposition elements. Data from the interviews support the view that the outside-in approach caused unnecessary confusion and friction among and between the various internal and external opposition groups, and opened the door for international partners with different political agendas to insert themselves into the diplomatic mix.
- 15) The inside-out approach, we believe, is still viable, although much more difficult to put into effect as the overall conflict has become more complicated, with more blood spilt on both sides, and many thus having become more invested in victory because of the feeling they cannot compromise after so much bloodshed. On the other hand, the very complicated nature of the situation combined with the virtual stalemate in military terms has perhaps created an opportunity to do the necessary foundational ground work to generate a representative critical mass of the opposition that establishes not only param-

eters for a negotiation framework but also a viable vision for the future – and a viable negotiating partner. One of our original assumptions was that there should be a Syrian solution for Syria. All the interviews we have conducted, all of the information we have acquired has, for us, only confirmed our hypothesis.

Potential Ways Forward

- 1) Sanctioned parties need to build on the common ground between the two main combatants that we have identified during the course of our project (see Appendix A). From this we can perhaps build a common narrative of the conflict, particularly its origins and early course of events. If we can find a mutually acceptable narrative, which may exist in only its broadest terms, it is a healthy start. This is only a beginning step, but it is a fairly non-threatening way to explore more common narratives and positions
- 2) By talking – and more importantly listening – to almost all of the parties involved in the Syrian conflict, in effect what the project has accomplished is to establish a venue for these very same parties to have had a conversation with each other. This is the framework for that conversation. We recommend that this conversation be continued. There is more to do in our opinion that can help expand the conversation and translate the conversation into some practical steps forward. We propose a second stage of the project that will offer a new set of targeted questions that not only take into account the changed circumstances since the project's inception but also deal more specifically with identifying interests and uncovering potential avenues toward political settlement. In essence, we propose first conducting interest mapping and interest analysis in order to determine what the parties to the conflict really want. Questions that could be termed 'negotiation questions' will help us help the Syrians determine negotiation parameters and ways to deal with competing interests. We can thus begin to identify 'golden bridges,' i.e. potential pathways to help individuals and groups find their own way from antagonistic positions toward a facilitating environment for dialogue and agreement.
- 3) The role of outsiders is to assist the Syrians in making their own decisions on how to resolve the conflict. The Geneva communiqué was a start. It called for a Syrian-led process, yet the very nature of the communiqué, the fact that it was put together by external powers, that no Syrians were identified with the process, that several of the most important parties to the conflict were not present, went against its intended purpose. Outsiders can play an important and positive role, but rather than leading and shaping the process they should be helping the Syrians themselves generate an inside-out paradigm. Long-term foundational work with the Syrian government and opposition must be done before a Geneva-type process can be implemented.
- 4) One of the ways to enter into a common narrative around which obstacles to conflict resolution can be torn down and positive common ground can be forged is to focus on dignity. We believe that dignity is a universal constant. How do we restore the dignity of Syria? How do we restore the dignity of the individual? Of the community? A positive common ground may be to focus on dignity in four different aspects: 1) personal/physical dignity, i.e. personal safety; 2) economic dignity, i.e. making a life and having opportunity; 3) political dignity, i.e. the ability to participate in decisions that affect one's

life and family; and 4) cultural dignity, i.e. respecting the diversity of Syria. We believe this is a powerful and personal way to move forward in our conversations. Potentially it is around this theme that a dialogue can be constructed rather than the usual terms of reference of negotiations. We believe that the entire orientation around which the process toward a political settlement has been framed to date must be re-oriented. Perhaps it can be re-oriented toward a process that focuses on the concept of dignity.

- 5) We also propose working in tandem with groups we have identified that will provide the support, operational frameworks, and tools to complement our work. They will help us map out the interests by beginning to help those on the ground identify their own interests and help them translate these interests into building 'golden bridges' that could feed into any sort of mediation initiative.
- 6) In the course of this 2nd phase, there will be an examination of the possibility that co-existence between the various religious sects is no longer possible. Perforce could be a temporary separation between a 'regime state' and non-regime state(s), generally following the contours of the military boundaries as they exist currently, with expected small fluctuations. Options will be considered/studied on what to do if this is the case.

Introduction

This is the final report of the Harvard-NUPI-Trinity Syria Research Project (HNT). The project is sponsored by Harvard Negotiation Project at Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA), the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (or NUPI, Oslo, Norway), and Trinity University (San Antonio, Texas, USA). The project is funded by the Norwegian and Swiss governments.

The project's research parameters include interviewing individuals and officials who are involved in the Syrian conflict with similar sets of questions. Based upon the responses to the questions from the respondent's conceptual paradigm, we have gathered a database of information on and general impressions of the Syrian conflict. We have identified potential areas of common ground between the Syrian government and its supporters on the one hand and the Syrian opposition and its supporters on the other. We have identified obstacles to a resolution of the conflict. This information could be useful in creating a foundation for a potential conflict resolution outcome, and we have recommended ways forward and options.

Almost all of the interviews have been conducted face-to-face, with one or two exceptions where the interviewee responded in written form via email because of scheduling conflicts. Many of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. A number of the respondents preferred not to be recorded, in which case the HNT interviewer or research assistant took detailed notes. A number of the interviews were conducted in Arabic, and these have been expertly translated into English. We have treated all of the interviews as confidential and not for attribution. They are used primarily for the purposes of achieving the project objectives and have been made available to our sponsors. Accompanying this final report is a document that contains samples of the sets of questions we asked various respondents and a 'Common Ground Matrix' document that lists side by side areas of convergence and divergence per question.

The HNT became operational in December 2012. We drew up a detailed interview protocol to guide all of our interviews with essentially the same basic set of questions asked of all those who we interviewed, with an expected tweaking, adding, or subtracting of some questions based on the position of the respondent (government official, Syrian opposition leader, Syrian government officials, etc.). We began our interviews in mid-December 2012 with a trip to Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey, where the research team extensively interviewed 27 leading figures of the Syrian opposition (or Syrian revolutionaries, as they preferred to be called), many of whom are active military commanders and political and religious figures in the Syrian opposition from inside Syria (and from most regions in Syria opposing the Syrian government and representing most of the secular to conservative religious to salafist spectrum of Syrian society). We did not, however, interview jihadist elements within the Syrian opposition, who play a significant role in the conflict. Nevertheless, we consider this group

of respondents as generally representative of the Syrian opposition inside Syria, although precaution must be taken because of the general diversity of the internal opposition groups.

The primary reason the project team initiated its sets of interviews with leading members of the internal opposition (meeting with them in Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey in December 2012) was that we strongly believed that they had been largely ignored by the international community, yet in our opinion they represented the real power within the Syrian opposition with the credibility and legitimacy they had acquired from actually doing most of the fighting and dying on their side of the conflict.

We have since interviewed a number of leading exiled leaders of the Syrian opposition in London, Paris, Beirut, and Cairo. Some of these are independent members of the opposition, others are affiliated with known Syrian external opposition groups. We have also interviewed leading British, French, American, Russian, Saudi Arabian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Egyptian, Turkish, Israeli, and, importantly, Syrian government officials. In addition, we have interviewed high-level officials from non-state actors such as the United Nations, the League of Arab States, Hizbullah, Hamas, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and some NGO officials, community leaders, and journalists engaged in and/or covering the conflict in Syria.

As of this writing, we have not interviewed any officials from Iran or Qatar, despite our intense efforts to do so. There could be many reasons for this, for instance, there were important changes in the leadership of both countries in summer 2013, just as we had tentatively scheduled some meetings, all of which complicated our efforts. There was also the run-up to a potential US military strike in late August, which scuttled other attempts. Since Iran is a primary backer of the Syria government and Qatar is a major supporter of the Syrian opposition, we will continue our efforts to meet with Iranian and Qatari officials and add the data to the existing final report if we prove to be successful in our efforts. We also did not attempt to interview Chinese officials. Although China has tacitly backed the Syrian government, particularly in the UN Security Council, it is not an active player on the ground in the Syrian conflict. In addition, the cost of travel to Beijing to meet with officials who can speak to the Syrian situation was deemed too exorbitant and better spent elsewhere. We did not interview any of the top members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), although we interviewed Syrian opposition commanders who serve (or have served) on the FSA military council and others who have fought in FSA units. In addition, we did not meet with any leading officials of the Syrian Kurdish population. We had a meeting set up with the head of the PYD in July, the main Kurdish party in Syria, but a week before the scheduled meeting, one of the top officials in the PYD was assassinated in Syria, and our meeting was understandably canceled. Other than this, we believe we have met with and extensively interviewed a broad canvas of the players who are involved in the Syrian conflict, and we therefore believe that our data offers a comprehensive view – and understanding – of the conflict.

In most of the interviews the interviewer followed a clear line of questioning. This acted as the control group of questions, samples of which can be found in Appendix B. Depending upon the interviewee/respondent, there were usually 2–3 questions that dealt specifically with that person's affiliation, be it a government or a group. The set of questions were divided into three parts: questions dealing with the past, i.e. mostly the origins and early stages of the uprising/conflict; the second series of questions revolved around what at the time of the

interviews were current or recent circumstances/events/issues related to the conflict; finally, the third set of questions focused on issues regarding what at the time could be considered the future of the conflict and of Syria itself. There were interviews in which this format was not followed for a variety of reasons, i.e. there was not enough time, the interviewee preferred to respond in narrative form rather than to specific questions, or some other reason. Regardless of this, even in these types of interviews, we were able to find responses that in effect answered some or all of the questions we had intended to ask.

At the beginning of each interview we explained our project briefly as well as the project objectives. We handed out a two page brief description of our project that included short biographical sketches of the team leaders as well as the names of our partners and associates who have helped us at various times and to varying degrees during the length of our project. Interviewers informed each interviewee that we operated under Chatham House rules, i.e. that anything said (or written or recorded) to us was not for attribution and was confidential. As such, to protect those who we interviewed, we do not list any names in this report or in the documents containing the actual interviews. Rather we give the date of the interview and a descriptive title of the interviewee that clearly places her or him in an appropriate and understandable context. In addition, the name of the interviewer has been hidden.

Project Mission

The HNT team leaders generated this project primarily because they believed that no one group or individual was really taking the necessary time to understand and analyze the various different views toward and opinions of the conflict from the wide variety of players on all sides who have a stake in the situation in Syria. First and foremost our mission has been to listen and learn. The primary objective has been to understand the conflict from the conceptual paradigms of the individuals, officials, groups, and governments involved in the conflict. The team leaders believe that only when all of the various viewpoints and perspectives are taken into account can proper analysis begin. The sets of responses and accompanying comparative analysis will not only enhance our understanding of the dynamics of the Syrian conflict but also enable an exploration of potential conflict resolution outcomes.

Team Leaders:

David W. Lesch: Dr. Lesch is Professor of Middle East History at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He received his MA and PhD from Harvard University. He is the author or editor of 12 books and overall has well over 100 publications, and he is generally regarded as one of the world's leading experts on Syria. Among his books are the following: *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (Yale University Press, 2012); *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Westview Press, 2012); *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (Yale University Press, 2005); and *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies* (5th edition, Westview Press, 2011). Dr. Lesch has regularly advised high-level officials in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and the United Nations. He has been traveling to Syria on a regular basis for almost a quarter century. Between 2004 and 2009 he frequently met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad as well as other leading Syrian officials, and he has also met with a number of Syrians now considered in the opposition. Dr. Lesch has often appeared on national and international radio and television such as CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, PBS Newshour, Al-Jazeera, NPR, and the BBC. He has been quoted in over 400 newspapers worldwide and has contributed opinion essays to *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Al-Monitor*, among others.

George Saghir: George is a dual Syrian-American citizen. He has had a long career in International Finance spanning over 25 years. George was a Managing Director at two leading Global Financial institutions before he became a Hedge Fund Portfolio Manager. Mr. Saghir has an M.B.A from Columbia University's Graduate School of Business. He also holds a B.A. in Economics from Essex University in the U.K. George has been published in the *International Economy* magazine, with articles on the Middle East economic instability and the U.S. housing market. Mr. Saghir is originally from the city of Aleppo in Syria. He

enjoys extensive contacts in the country at various levels. His extended family continues to reside in the country.

William Ury: William Ury is co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project and the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. He received his B.A. from Yale University in linguistics and anthropology and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University in social anthropology. He is co-author of *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* and author of the award-winning bestsellers *Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations*, *Getting to Peace: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop* and *The Power of a Positive No*. Over the last 35 years, Ury has served as a negotiation adviser and third party in conflicts and wars around the world from Indonesia to Latin America to the Caucasus. With former President Jimmy Carter, he co-founded the International Negotiation Network, a non-governmental body seeking to end civil wars around the world. During the 1980s, he helped the US and Soviet governments create nuclear crisis centers designed to avert an accidental nuclear war. Ury is also co-founder of the Abraham Path Initiative, which seeks to build mutual understanding and respect between East and West by opening a permanent path of cultural travel in the Middle East that retraces the footsteps of Abraham or Ibrahim, the forefather of many faiths and cultures. Ury is the recipient of the Whitney North Seymour Award from the American Arbitration Association and the Distinguished Service Medal from the Russian Parliament. His work has been widely featured in the media from *The New York Times* to the *Financial Times* and from ABC to the BBC.

Associates and Partners:

Geoffrey Aronson, Peter Galbraith, Martin Griffiths, Michael Keating, Frida Nome, Jonathan Powell, Nir Rosen, Paul Salem, Patrick Seale, Randa Slim, Matthew Waldman

Note on the Data

The following is a short narrative of the responses to each of the questions we asked in the interviews broken down by question and into several categories: internal Syrian opposition; external Syrian opposition; UN/Arab League/Western government officials arrayed against the Syrian government; and Syrian government officials as well as officials from governments and organizations supportive of the Syrian government.

We generally note majority opinions and trends in terms of the responses. If there is a strong minority opinion within the responses to a particular question from one of the groups mentioned above, this is also noted. In addition, if there is a response or two that clearly deviate from the general trend but are, in the opinion of the authors, deemed interesting enough to mention, we do so and provide context.

What can be considered conclusive is left up to the reader, but the authors believe that where there are strong trends apparent, this is evidence that can be considered reliable. The authors are fully aware that some respondents, particularly government officials, provided carefully considered answers that in a number of cases were given only after consultation with their superiors. We are cognizant of the fact that respondents may be telling us what we wanted to hear (or what they wanted us to hear) for whatever reasons. We are also aware that in some cases the respondents believed we were an American enterprise, perhaps even working in coordination with the US government, which, of course, could not be further from the truth. In any event, their responses are still noteworthy. In general, the authors are very pleased with the frankness and honesty of the responses from most of our interviewees.

Note on the Text

Language is important. As in most wars, the name by which it is known or to which it is referred is different depending upon who is doing the referencing. For instance, we were corrected right away in our first interviews with Syrian internal opposition leaders when we referred to the conflict as a 'rebellion' and those fighting as 'rebels.' This is the terminology more in line with Syrian government usage, although it employs the term 'terrorists' more often than not to describe the armed Syrian opposition. The internal opposition much prefers to be called 'revolutionaries' and the overall conflict as a 'revolution.' Opposition elements also do not like the term 'rebellion' because it indicates what they are fighting against had some legitimacy to begin with, when in fact they believe that the Syrian government never had any legitimacy.

In addition, most arrayed against the Syrian government called it a 'regime,' a reference to what in their view is a small elite group that has ruled Syria from the top in an authoritarian fashion and outside normal government institutions. For this very reason, it is a term that Syrian government officials dislike. We try to be as neutral as possible in our references; however, we do try to reflect the tone and viewpoint of the people we are interviewing and thus try to use the terms they themselves employ in their interviews. To some, the terms 'regime' and 'government' are inter-changeable.

There are other terms that are problematic and probably some we have not identified. Our intent was to remain as objective as possible. If some cases slipped through our editing fingers or if we have insulted a particular party, rest assured that it was entirely unintentional, and we hope to learn from our mistakes.

Narrative Summaries of Responses

****Note:** Because of time constraints, the settings, and/or the particular wishes of the respondent, often every question on the list was not asked at the interviews. Based on these factors, the interviewers frequently had to employ triage to the lists of questions and could only ask certain ones. In addition, some interviewees preferred to respond to the questions in one long narrative rather than respond to each question one by one. In these cases, after the interview we would go back into the transcript of the recording or the detailed notes of the meeting and ‘find’ many of the responses to specific questions for our question matrix.

The Past:

Question 1: From your perspective, what are three reasons why the Syrian uprising began when it did?

A. Governments, Organizations, and Prominent Individuals Considered to be Supportive of the Syrian Government: *All of those interviewed can be considered top officials in their respective governments, including the Syrian government (those who are still in the government or were in the government at least during the beginning stages of the uprising/conflict and who still maintain a working relationship with Damascus), or organizations responsible for or intimately involved in these supportive efforts.*

As expected, most were much less critical of the Syrian government than others surveyed in this report; however, all to some degree admitted that there were socio-economic problems in Syria and accompanying frustrations that helped bring about the uprising. As with the Syrian opposition, all pointed to the Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt as the match that lit the fire in Syria, without which the uprising would not have occurred. Almost all mentioned foreign manipulation to some degree. This was strongly asserted by Syrian government officials, i.e. Saudi, Qatari, Turkish, American, and Israeli conspiracies (separate and coordinated) instigated and fueling the uprising and the conflict (one also mentioned France and the UK) – Syria was being punished for its policies in the past, particularly its opposition to the US-led war in Iraq; indeed, it is their claim that the so-called harsh crackdown by the Syrian government forces was simply a reaction to the arms being supplied to the ‘terrorists’ by outside governments, i.e. it was not initiated a priori by the government. Another pro-regime Alawite believes it was a long-term conspiracy against Syria: ‘The [foreign] governments planted the seeds of this conflict. This was not a spontaneous revolution; it is the fruit of this work.’ This person also mentioned that this is a US-Israeli plan to not only weaken Syria but also Hizbullah.

The Syrian government officials very strongly believe the uprising was also fueled by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters; in fact, the Syrian government officials very much see themselves as preserving a way a life, a secular way of life that creates a secure and welcoming environment for all religious faiths and ethnicities. They also believe the Syrian government was taken by surprise by the extent of the protests and should have planned better to deal with them, which explains some of the oscillation in the nature of the government response in the beginning. One ex-Syrian official said the government believed that Qatar and Turkey would remain more on the sidelines when the uprising began and were taken aback by the level of support Doha and Ankara gave the rebels. One even stated that the improvement in relations between Syria on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other was a total deception, i.e. that Doha and Ankara only did it to ‘establish dormant cells, terrorist elements to use later in a domestic struggle. Even a member of the Qatari royal family lived in Syria to recruit enemies; now he is in Lebanon, still recruiting.’ They used the Deraa incident to let loose all of these cells. ‘The [Syrian regime] is the only regime left standing against Israel,’ and therefore the West conspired to weaken if not remove it.

This ex-official said the Qatari opposition stemmed from a disagreement regarding who should be PM in Lebanon (Qataris wanted Saad Hariri, the Syrians did not, in June 2011, and the Syrian government backed Najib Mikati, who did in fact become PM, and this annoyed the Qataris). Also, the Qataris wanted Ayad Allawi as PM in Iraq, which Asad actually agreed with, but acquiesced to Nouri al-Maliki because this was the Iranian choice, and this upset the Qataris. Lesch can confirm in his discussions with Asad in the past that this is most likely correct. In addition, the Qataris asked Asad to support the Libyan rebels, but because of his past relationship with Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, the Syrian president supported the latter, again to the consternation of Doha. As for the Saudis, Riyadh needs Syria to break from Iran as part and parcel of the Saudi-Iranian regional cold war. The Saudi-Syrian relationship had been a pendulum swinging back and forth, and the Saudis have been alternatively bitterly disappointed and hopeful in Bashar al-Asad, the former taking hold at the time of the uprising, and therefore they are backing the rebels.

Several mentioned that the West is purposely creating the war in Syria in order to establish a haven for terrorists/jihadists so that the Syrian government can do the West’s bidding in getting rid of them. They also raised the possibility that the West may want them in one place, though this was not necessarily pre-meditated, but once it began happening, per the Syrian government’s narrative, the West fed into it. Indeed, some find it ‘incredible’ that the West is siding with al-Qaida. As such, no one in this camp believes the West, NATO or the US is against terrorism. One stated (a pro-regime Druze): ‘the biggest gift to a dictator is to put al-Qaida against him; the liberals, like me, prefer the regime [to the jihadists].’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: *These were militia commanders, religious and political leaders, and other activists who were actively involved in opposing the Syrian government. They either were still living in Syria or were going back and forth to Syria from Turkey. The interviews were conducted in December 2012 in Istanbul and, primarily, Gaziantep; however, the project team has maintained consistent contact via Skype with many of them. The people we interviewed were from all over Syria: Damascus, Deir al-Zor, Raqqa, Idlib, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and other smaller towns. And they had been and were at the time of the interview fighting or otherwise opposing the Syrian government from a variety of fronts.*

Almost all the responses revolved around the following: 1) the Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt, i.e. without these happening first, especially the fall of long entrenched leaders/regimes, they would not have been emboldened to begin or involve themselves in large-scale protests. They broke the barrier of fear against the Syrian regime; 2) lack of opportunity, i.e. the monopoly of power and wealth that a select few had, particularly Alawites as well as non-Alawites well-connected to the regime. In this can also be listed systemic corruption at all levels by the government and the system it engenders and sustains; 3) the blunt security response of the regime, i.e. the decision by the regime to use force to quell the uprisings actually produced the opposite result as many felt committed and compelled to take up arms in response – thereby, what were initially peaceful protests evolved into armed conflict in a spiral of escalating violence. A number of opposition may not have been surprised by the fact that the regime responded with force, but many were surprised at the level of force employed, and they became disillusioned with the regime and/or had the truth about the regime, in their views, revealed. As one leading revolutionary stated: ‘We did not realize that we had such a criminal regime...had I known that Syria would be destroyed in this way I probably would not have joined the revolution. But had I known that the regime was this criminal, I would have been more enthusiastic about the revolution. There is a difference between knowing what the future will hold and between joining the revolution and finding out the truth.’ After a time, then, many opposition believed they had no other choice but to fight to the end because they felt if they lost, the regime would hunt them down and kill them anyway; and 4) perhaps the most overwhelming sentiment (certainly the most passionate response on why the uprising began) was the deep feeling of injustice and humiliation felt from various indignities suffered from the regime either directly or indirectly. Most of this emerged from imprisonment and torture and/or other indignities incurred from the mukhabarat (security services) in a repressive environment. As one revolutionary leader bemoaned, ‘...the penetration of intelligence forces in life, and intelligence service intrusion into anyone’s life at any minute.’

Other less mentioned reasons were the following: the memory of what happened in Hama in 1982, especially for those who live in that area, i.e. they were never going to forget, and given an opportunity to redress what happened, they would take it; a few mentioned that there were strictly religious reasons for some to join the opposition, i.e. against the secular, Alawite nature of the regime and secular society it promoted.

It is clear to the authors, however, that many of these deficiencies and frustrations in Syria had existed for years. The difference, or the trigger so to speak, was the Arab spring, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia, where long, well-entrenched regimes were overthrown in a relatively short period of time with relatively little bloodshed.

C. External Syrian Opposition: *These were Syrians who had been living in exile away from their homeland, either for many years or had left the country following the beginning of the conflict and were no longer actively involved in terms of being on the frontlines of the conflict. All were involved in different ways in supporting opposition to the Syrian government, and most can be considered leaders of the external Syrian opposition. These interviews were conducted in London, Paris, Beirut, Cairo, and Washington, DC, beginning in February 2013 with the final ones in August 2013.*

Their responses to this first question almost exactly replicated the ones given by the internal Syrian opposition. One general difference expressed by some was that they did not expect the regime to crackdown so harshly on the demonstrators at the beginning, whereas most of the internal opposition expressed very little surprise regarding the crackdown itself, although a few, as noted above, were also surprised by the degree of harshness. Since many of the external opposition leaders are ex-government officials, academics, and intellectuals, their responses tended to be more detailed, especially in discussing socio-economic factors, i.e. the so-called youth bulge in Syria (as elsewhere in the Arab world), income disparities, differences between the countryside and the cities, particularly Damascus (and the resentment that bred in the countryside, which is where the uprising was primarily based in the beginning); the timing was bad in economic terms, i.e. Syria had been implementing economic liberalization programs, which naturally cause a dip in certain economic indicators and a certain amount of economic dislocation before systemic improvement can be felt. The Arab spring-induced demonstrations occurred during this dip and dislocation, which exacerbated the feeling of frustration and disillusionment (in other words, if the Arab spring had occurred a few years later – or perhaps even a few years earlier – it would not have been as successfully transferred to Syria because there would have been a less conducive fertile environment for revolution). As it happened, there were not enough social safety nets during that time of economic dislocation to mute revolutionary fervor – economic and social frustration together created the combustible environment triggered by the Arab spring. As one external opposition leader said, ‘Revolutions don’t start because of poverty. They start because people were starting to get out of poverty.’

In addition, a few external opposition, reflecting regime sentiments, stated that there was in fact a foreign hand in place in terms of stirring things up in Syria, particularly the Saudis, Qataris, and the Turks (the latter more so after the uprising began, the former two had been at it for years).

D. UN/Arab League/Arab Government Officials/Western Government Officials and those who recently were government officials in Western or Arab Countries (those generally supportive of the opposition and/or the removal of the government/regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad): *All of those interviewed were top officials in their respective governments or organizations or recently were. Generally speaking, they were those who either were in charge of their government’s or organization’s policy toward Syria or were intimately involved in their government’s or organization’s policies currently or at some point since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011.*

Their responses to this question closely followed those provided by the internal and external Syrian opposition.

A couple of high level representatives from pro-West Arab monarchies suggested the time was just up for the military dictatorships of the region. They lacked legitimacy, as opposed to monarchies that go back hundreds of years in some cases, and they therefore have more legitimacy. Along with this, they commented that the monarchies ‘managed’ protests better with a combination of reforms and politics (of course, they did not mention economic largesse in some cases).

Many commented on the 'assault on dignity' by the regime. Regarding the influence of the Arab spring and existing dilapidated conditions in Syria, one stated that, 'when the match was lit, it fell on some very, very, very dry combustible tinder, having to do with economic grievances in the outback and a perception...that Damascus and, to a certain extent, Aleppo just eating everything....That economic liberalization had basically enriched regime insiders....' Bashar and his family (and even his father) forgot that their roots were in the countryside. In a way they became that which the Ba`th party originally rebelled against, the urban notables and landowners who also controlled political power.

A number commented on the influential role of social media and technology, that the prevalence of television and the Internet has brought new ideas to the forefront in the Arab world, especially among the youth. One person expressed surprise that Bashar al-Asad, the self-professed computer nerd who had helped bring social media into Syria to a degree, did not adequately understand its power. A number of officials commented that there was a degree of disillusionment in Bashar al-Asad among the Syrian populace, therefore the disappointment was that much greater since they had initially had faith in him or at least believed he would not countenance such a harsh response (one gets the feeling that this sentiment existed in some official circles as well).

Question 2: In your opinion, is there anything that the Syrian government and/or President Bashar al-Asad could have done at the beginning stages of the uprising/conflict to prevent it from escalating or happening at all?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Syrian government officials admitted that there were probably mistakes made by the government at the beginning of the uprising; however, they did not elaborate in specific terms. One mentioned that the government did not see it coming soon enough and did not adequately anticipate the level of protest, especially in light of what happened in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere, perhaps suggesting a certain level of complacency. One mentioned that Asad did exempt his cousin, the governor in charge of Deraa, in a way that suggested to the authors that this probably should not have been done, i.e. he should have been removed and punished. One Syrian official stated that the March 30, 2011 speech by Asad did not matter since there was already a conspiracy in place perpetrated by foreign countries (did not mention the countries). A pre-existing conspiracy against Syria was a consistent theme, and that the West and its regional allies used the Arab spring and the disturbances in Syria as an excuse to try to get rid of the Syrian government/regime.

One Alawite journalist who is well-connected to the Syrian government agrees that the regime did not properly read the changes in the region wrought by the Arab spring. It should have done something to pre-empt it, i.e. announcing reforms, particularly steps to reduce corruption in the military-security apparatus, anger against and frustration with was a major cause of the protests. He goes along as well with the idea that there was a pre-existing conspiracy by the Western powers and their allies prior to the incident at Deraa. The demonstrations offered an opportunity to the West, long having wanted to get rid of the Syrian regime, to do it, so they started secretly arming the opposition elements, which caused the Syrian government forces to react in kind, which then escalated the violence and led to the protracted conflict. It is his strong assertion that if the demonstrations had remained peaceful, the regime would have fallen, i.e. those calling for reform in the Syrian government would not have been trumped and ousted since the military-security apparatus and other hard liners would not have had an excuse to launch its forceful crackdown. In this vein, the major mistake was by those foreign powers that introduced weapons into the uprising at the beginning stages. As he stated, 'It succeeded in revealing the true face of this movement, which is a militant movement. There were peaceful demonstrators, but the people behind them [in the West], pulling the strings, were trying to achieve their colonial objectives that they have failed to achieve for the last hundred years.'

One gets the sense from these observations that, by and large, Syrian government officials truly believe, whether true or not, that there was a pre-existing conspiracy latched onto by its foreign enemies in light of the Arab spring and events inside Syria. Therefore, based on their prior experience with the West after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and especially after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, that its foreign enemies were taking up where they left off, and that they had no choice but to eventually adopt the use of force because to them it was a battle of survival from the beginning given the constellation of forces arrayed against Syria inside and out.

A high level Russian official stated that the Syrian government made many mistakes at the beginning, but he did not elaborate on exactly what those mistakes were.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Almost all believe that the Syrian government could have done something at the beginning. Most responses revolved around the possibility of Asad publicly and quickly firing his cousin, the governor of Deraa, and perhaps as well the security chief in the area (following the news of the roughing up of the schoolchildren who wrote anti-government graffiti on a wall and subsequent anti-government protests in Deraa). Some suggested that he could have gone on television to do this, or better yet he could have visited Deraa personally and distributed largesse to prevent an escalation of the demonstrations rather than choosing to crackdown on the protestors there. In addition, many believe Asad also missed a golden opportunity to release the building pressure of protests with his first speech to the nation addressing the situation on March 30, 2011. Many, even pro-Asad supporters at the time, believed the speech would spell out specific concessions as well as take the necessary actions to punish those responsible for Deraa; instead, for the most part in their view, he blamed the protests on conspiracy generated externally and armed gangs and terrorists working with foreign powers, and he offered limited and qualified reforms. Asad did not correctly understand the nature of the anger and disappointment fueling the protests. While saying these things, a number of respondents indicated that it was not in the regime's DNA to make any concessions or announce real reforms, i.e. it only knows one way to deal with protest, and that is to crackdown harshly.

C. External Syrian Opposition: The respondents largely echoed what was outlined in B. Several of those interviewed who were top Syrian officials at the beginning of the uprising (but defected and/or left the country) stated that there was a great deal of waffling back and forth at the highest levels (and with Asad personally) on how to respond to the protests, ranging between announcing serious reforms and punishing the Syrian officials responsible for Deraa on the one hand and moving quickly with force to put down the protests on the other. Thus the delay of almost two weeks before Asad made his first speech. At first there was a little bit of both, but then those advocating a more forceful government response gained more influence and convinced Asad to use the military and security forces. Several former Syrian government officials said that the security forces convinced Asad that the protests could be put down in a matter of weeks. One stated that the use of force was a blessing in disguise because it compelled the opposition elements to commit themselves to overthrow the regime rather than simply asking for more reforms (and the implementation of already announced reforms). Another commented that arms coming into Syria from outside countries in support of the uprising played into the hands of the security services, giving them an excuse to push for a more forceful crackdown. Indeed, one ex-government official went so far as to say that the government response to the uprising was as much a coup by regime hardliners against the moderate elements ('the reformers') in the Syrian regime as it was a practical measure to quell the protests.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: There were a variety of responses to this question. Many stated in various ways what is outlined in B, i.e. the missed opportunities of the Syrian government. A number of respondents believe that Asad had to order the crackdown (rather than reforms) or he might have been removed by hard line elements within the regime. Another (a pro-West former official from Egypt) stated that this is just the way

that authoritarian regimes work in the region, and the empowerment of the mukhabarat produces this sort of result when faced with internal opposition. One recent top official in the US who was intimately involved in the Syrian crisis suggested that the United States should have sent an envoy, perhaps Ambassador Robert Ford, to Damascus in the early stages of the uprising to present to Asad a clear picture of US policy and what Syria would lose if it reacted harshly to the protests. In particular, the 'warning' should have focused on recent progress on Israeli-Syrian negotiations that the US had been brokering, i.e. the negotiations would cease and desist if the Syrian government used force (or continued to use force) against the demonstrators (his suggested verbiage to Asad: 'The first casualty is going to be the peace track. Very first casualty, right out of the box. This will be the first thing to go'). This interviewee also suggested that Asad and his inner circle believed that they could put down the protests fairly quickly without too much damage to their position and then resume the negotiations with Israel brokered by the US. One recent top level official from Israel believes that the missed opportunity was from the international community, i.e. if it intervened in the early stages of the conflict it would have saved '80,000 lives,' less blood to avenge, less jihadis, and reconciliation would have been easier. Another top Israeli official stated that the West's expectations that Asad would implement reforms in the beginning were too high, when in fact, in his opinion, there is not much of anything Asad could have done to stave off the protests.

Question 3: Has the Syrian conflict lasted longer than you expected?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Syrian officials also did not expect the conflict to last this long. One top Syrian government official blames the international community for prolonging the conflict, not only by supporting the rebels but also by not sincerely or fairly pursuing diplomatic settlements when Damascus had agreed to negotiate repeatedly and publicly. As one stated, ‘I don’t believe those people [Western countries and their regional allies] who work to ignite all this whether they are domestic or regional or international. I don’t think their objective is the president or the system at all. I think the objective is Syria as a country...’

A Hizbullah figure sympathetic to (although not uncritical of) the Syrian government stated that the real turning point in terms of prolonging the conflict was what he called ‘the militarization of the [rebel] movement,’ which reinforced the sectarian nature of the opposition and led to ‘much more important external intervention from different sides...One intervention provokes another.’ It is clear to this person that the military actions on both sides in May/June 2011 was the turning point [perhaps the Syrian government response at Jish al-Shaghur near the Turkish border]. He stated that ‘the discourse of the political opposition was transformed by this show. They began to speak about the necessity of external intervention. It was clear to the regime that now the opposition was trying to repeat the Libyan scenario. It was a good point.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The overwhelming response from internal opposition figures to this question was ‘yes, much longer than expected.’ Various reasons were repeatedly given as to why, such as: 1) lack of timely and adequate support from the West, particularly the US; 2) disunity and fragmentation of Syrian opposition; 3) different agendas of outside powers supporting different factions of the opposition, i.e. the lack of coordinated external support, a situation that only exacerbates the divisions inside the Syrian opposition movement; 4) unexpected brutality of the Syrian regime; and 5) did not expect the level of support given to the regime by Iran and Russia. A few mentioned that ‘certain countries’ do not want Asad to fall and, in fact, want Syria weakened and the parties fighting to continue to kill each other. A number mentioned that the Syrian opposition believed the Syrian regime would fall in a relatively short period of time because of how quickly the regimes fell in Tunisia and Egypt and how the West intervened in Libya. They clearly expected help from the West similar to what happened in Libya. One opposition leader commented that one reason the conflict has lasted so long is that surrounding countries are ‘getting rid of their filth by sending to us,’ such as the Saudis sending in salafists and the Turks exporting the PKK to Syria.

Only a couple of those we interviewed expected from the early stages that it would take a long time [to defeat the regime], perhaps 5–10 years, although they did not elaborate as to why. Several told us that the question revolved around getting the necessary arms, i.e. if they received sufficient military aid from the West and its regional allies, they could finish the job in a matter of months; if not, it would take much longer, perhaps one or two more years.

An interesting note to add to this is that a number of internal opposition figures told us (in December 2012) that had they known beforehand that the conflict would last this long and be this destructive, they would never have joined the revolution. They then say, however,

that they now have no choice but to see this through because otherwise they will be hunted down and killed by a vengeful, victorious regime. These sentiments have only multiplied, in the view of the authors, among the opposition since that time, as we have stayed in touch via Skype with a number of the opposition we interviewed in December 2012.

C. External Syrian Opposition: All of the external opposition figures we interviewed responded that the conflict lasted much longer than expected. The reasons why are the same as those outlined in B. To this one emphasized how what happened in Libya raised expectations that the international community would do the same for the Syrian opposition, and when Russia went along in the Libyan case, they figured that this was the new Russia, the new Putin (as Libya had been a Russian/Soviet ally in the region and a state to whom Moscow sold arms), and that it would thus acquiesce in the UN Security Council and pave the way for direct military support, specifically a no fly zone at the very least.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Again, most of those we interviewed in governments and organizations (or recently in these governments or organizations) agreed that they thought the Syrian regime would fall fairly quickly and did not expect it to last this long at all – and for the same reasons listed in B. As one high level British official put it: ‘Was there a collective optimism by a delusional West? Yes. We've come to the realization that it will be a long slog. It's difficult to get people to think about it in conflict terms. He's not winning, but he's not losing.’ One top UN official, one Egyptian official, and one top Hamas official told us that they believed from the beginning that it would take a long time because they understood the differences in Syria compared to Egypt or Tunisia as well as the fact that, as the Hamas official put it, ‘The [Syrian] government is strong enough to live, but it is too weak to dismiss the other. At the same time, the revolution is strong enough to live, but it is too weak to beat the government. It is very difficult for both sides to finish the battle.’

One senior Turkish official placed a lot of the blame on Asad himself for not implementing true reforms (and taking Turkish advice to do so). Another senior Turkish official stated that ‘we’ failed to see the extent to which Asad was prepared to go to stay in power. This official states that it was the Syrian regime that armed the opposition in the beginning to create the impression that it was an armed rebellion in order to sanction the use of government forces – and this led to a spiraling out of control of violence that prolonged the conflict. He also said that the Syrian regime had successfully ‘sectarianized’ the conflict, thus leading to a more committed group supporting the regime (for fear of getting massacred if they lose) and leading to the inability of the opposition to recruit religious and ethnic minorities in Syria into its cause...and making Syria a proxy Sunni versus Shiite sectarian battleground regionally.

One former senior US official commented that many analysts in the Obama administration had estimated that Libyan President Muammar al-Gaddafi would last a long time, maybe a year, so when he unexpectedly fell in a much shorter period of time, the calculus on Syria was adjusted accordingly, i.e. that Asad would also fall in relatively short order.

An Israeli official stated that in his opinion the reason why it has lasted so long is that there has been an ‘adaptation competition, and each sides’ supporters have ratcheted up their levels of support in this spiraling escalation, so it's not going to finish now. It will grind on for a long time. The same decentralization of the rebels hindering the political settle-

ment helps them survive because you can't cut off the head.' Another Israeli interviewed commented that since the minorities in Syria largely support the regime (or are at the very least not supporting the opposition), that combined with elements of the Sunni population (particularly the Sunni business class tied into the regime) who are sitting on the fence and still may believe that the Asad regime offers the best chance for stability (and therefore a resumption of business activities for some), that the regime can hang on for quite some time under current conditions.

A senior Saudi official, while blaming the Iranians and Hizbullah intervention for prolonging the conflict, also blamed the lack of outside support for the Syrian opposition. He especially pointed out that MANPADS (man portable air defense systems) would be an 'important weapon' for the opposition. A top Lebanese Druze official said it has taken so long, 'because of the reluctance and cowardice of the US and Western world, and the...fake promises made to the Syrian National Council and then to the alliance [Coalition?].' He adds that this is due to the fact that US policy toward Syria is being driven by the memories of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the fact that the Obama administration has been focusing on domestic economic policy: 'He [Obama] needs to win the midterm elections so to keep his healthcare program safe. Why should he come to Syria and mangle in Syrian affairs?'

The overall sense is that for whatever reasons one chooses to believe, a virtual stalemate has settled in, and that unless conditions change dramatically in one direction or another, such as more robust military support by the West, the stalemate will continue. In addition, there is a general sense that even if Asad ultimately survives, that he will not be able to reconstitute his power and/or territorial reach to that which existed prior to March 2011.

Question 4: What have been the obstacles to resolving the conflict?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Syrian officials blame the West and its regional allies for creating obstacles to resolving the conflict, saying that they are behind the war and do not want to see it end until the Syrian government is defeated and/or Syria destroyed. They tend to believe that Syria is being punished for its past opposition to the West and Israel. They believe they have made sincere offers to peacefully resolve the conflict, but the West and its regional allies need to stop supporting the ‘terrorists.’ One recent Syrian official added that the level of bloodshed is complicating matters, i.e. people on both sides do not want to compromise with the other. He added that the resulting level of mistrust is hampering any sort of negotiated settlement. He mentioned, as did other Syrian officials, that the Syrian regime cannot identify anyone to negotiate with on the side of the opposition because of the latter’s fragmentation, and that the Russians have been trying to identify ‘serious’ opposition leaders to negotiate with the Syrian government but have not been able to find many.

A senior Russian official bemoaned the inability of the West, especially the US, to bring about a unified Syrian opposition with a unified leadership with which to negotiate. He also stated that the Syrian Coalition has expressed conditions that are clearly unacceptable to the other side, and it seems that he was disappointed in what he sees as the constant changing of the parameters of a negotiated solution in the West [this interview was just prior to the May 2013 Lavrov-Kerry call for a Geneva meeting]. He also suggested that the West and the Syrian opposition together have not taken Asad’s proposals, especially that which was contained in his speech in January 2013, seriously enough. There are elements there that can be negotiated, but pre-conditions on the side of the opposition are preventing this. He would like to see a more unified, consistent approach by the opposition because, as he stated, ‘there are a lot of positions inside the opposition. Some are closer to President Asad, some are not.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The responses varied, but the most consistent one revolved around the lack of international support and/or resolve, with particular blame on the US for its lack of leadership. Related to this, there was mention of a great deal of mistrust in international organizations, such as the UN, the Arab League, and Western governments due to the lack of support, and in some cases there is a feeling of betrayal after the West was perceived to have promised such support and after the West and its allies called on Bashar al-Asad to step down in summer and fall of 2011. Another fairly consistent response focused on the lack of unity in the Syrian opposition inside Syria, outside Syria, and divisions between the internal and external opposition; therefore, the opposition as a whole has not been able to articulate a shared vision for the future or coordinate policies. One person blamed the Syrian government for creating obstacles, in essence forcing an escalation, and thus prolongation, of the conflict. One secular revolutionary member mentioned that growing extremism (presumably in the internal Syrian opposition) was complicating things, while another also commented on this, saying that ‘the Americans made a foolish move when they put Jabhat al-Nusra on the terrorism watch list. It’s like they have a relationship with Bashar. They will make Jabhat al-Nusra more strong with this.’ One opposition leader stated that no one, not in the international community or in the region (with perhaps the exception of Turkey), wants to see the revolution end, and they are not really serious about taking the steps necessary to bring the conflict to the close. This same person also echoed what several told us, i.e. that

the internal Syrian opposition lacks a nationalist type leader who could unify the various internal groups. He said that there are such people who could be leaders, but he inferred that potential internal opposition leaders have been ignored or overlooked by the international community as the latter has focused more on external opposition leaders.

C. External Syrian Opposition: As in A, many focused on the divisions within the opposition as a whole as well as the different agendas among the foreign countries supporting the opposition and the lack of at the very least financial coordination in developing a single, structured financial aid source rather than many sources going to different opposition groups. As one of the top exiled leaders of the external opposition told us, ‘There are too many hands in the pot.’ Another top exiled leader commented that the increasing militarization of the conflict has inestimably complicated the situation, closing potential doors for negotiations. The conflict has thus evolved into a stalemate, and unless one of three things happens (1. international parties force a political solution; 2. one side wins militarily and forces a solution; or 3. there is a major shift inside the regime that fosters a political settlement), the conflict will continue. Several mentioned that there are too many in the opposition who have irretrievably committed themselves to the destruction of the regime, thereby boxing themselves in and preventing any chance for a negotiated solution. Indeed, several internal and external opposition leaders told us that it was a mistake to say that Asad had to step down before any negotiations could begin; on the other hand, a couple noted that they were just following the lead of the international community, regretting that they did. One mentioned that by ‘cornering the regime,’ it had no choice but to fight to the end. Finally, one top leader placed a good part of the blame on the Syrian regime itself, or what he called ‘the mentality of the regime,’ i.e. Asad ‘uses the violence as drugs, and say maybe another dose will solve the problem, but he fell down [failed] and more and more of destroying people and the country.’ In other words, the regime keeps thinking it can win, and perhaps its own definition of winning has evolved from total victory to surviving, and therefore it has not been willing to seriously pursue a negotiated settlement. This can also perhaps be said about elements of the opposition.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: The responses included many of what has been noted above, such as: the fact that Asad thinks he can outlast the opposition and still win (thus not willing to come to negotiate) and/or important elements of the opposition still think they can win; support from Iran, Russia and Hizbullah to the Syrian regime; fragmented opposition not able to offer a clear negotiating partner; not enough international resolve; and divisions and different agendas among the regional players (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey primarily) and the international powers supporting the opposition. A senior Saudi official added that the West ‘put too much stock in the external opposition.’ He also expressed surprise at the reluctance of the West, particularly the US, to get more involved in the conflict, reflecting what others said, i.e. that the external coalition supporting the Syrian regime is more committed and united in purpose than the external coalition supporting the Syrian opposition. As one leading official of a regional organization dealing with Syria stated, ‘This is the perfect formula for a fascist regime to win. It was by this means that Franco won the civil war in Spain. The fascists were unified and had unified support from Italy and Germany. The republicans were divided with divided troops; and their backers, the US and Russia, were fighting a proxy war.’ Many commented in one way or another that the fact that Syria has become a proxy battleground regionally (between Iran and its allies and Saudi Arabia/

Qatar and their allies) and internationally (between the US and its allies and Russia and its allies) have proved to be tremendous obstacles to a resolution of the Syrian conflict. Some expressed concern regarding the heightened Islamic extremist factions in the opposition, with one regional official saying that his biggest fear is that 'the US will see al-Nusra [and other jihadi groups] as more dangerous than the regime, so they will be pragmatic. They will coordinate with the regime.' Some Western officials mentioned that they may have gone out too far in front in terms of calling on Asad to step down, with one commenting that the West 'put all our eggs into one basket: Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but they were confident.' One Western official noted that the 'half-hearted' effort to support the opposition 'brings you all the pain [of intervention] for something that does not change facts on the ground.' Finally, a senior Israeli official noted that one of the main problems/obstacles has been that both sides, but especially the opposition, have placed pre-conditions on negotiations – it is his belief that there should be no conditions to get to the negotiating table, especially the pre-condition that Asad must go before any negotiations commence.

Question 5: Has the UN played a positive role? How, or if not, why not?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: We did not have the opportunity to address this issue too much with Syrian officials, but those who mentioned the UN did not have a favorable outlook toward it; indeed, the sense the authors got was that they did not trust the UN at all, and they see it (as well as the Arab League) as being controlled by powers inimical to their interests. Two high-level officials did have a very positive view of General Mood and other UN personnel attached to UNSMIS. One senior Russian official we interviewed expressed support for Mr. Brahimi's holiday cease-fire plan in the fall of 2012 that failed to take hold, and he generally supported the efforts of Mr. Brahimi and his team, although he recognized the different agendas in the UN Security Council that hampered the efforts of the UN special envoy. He also mentioned that there are 'forces inside and outside the country [Syria] who oppose a solution,' thus complicating the efforts of the UN.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The internal opposition we interviewed were unanimous in saying that the UN had not played a positive role; indeed, their comments were often quite passionate (as they were in expressing disappointment in the US role), and it appears to the authors that the question – the UN – had become a focal point for the opposition's overall frustration with what they perceived to be the lack of international support or even attention. More specific comments included the following regarding the UN: it was not serious; it was too late; and it has been too subject to the wishes of the great powers.

C. External Syrian Opposition: We did not receive many comments from the external opposition on this question, but those we did obtain reflected the negative views of the internal opposition, although they were not nearly as passionate in expressing their frustration, probably because they were not on the front lines experiencing first-hand the deprivations of war, which no doubt enhanced the anger among the internal opposition.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Responses generally reflected a more positive disposition toward the role of the UN while recognizing certain problems that for the most part were not of its own doing. As one recent senior US official noted: 'the efforts themselves have been positive and well-motivated, and their failure to produce results has not been due to any kind of incompetence, stupidity, or naivete on the part of the United Nations in this.' This official points to the positive impact of the UN observer force despite not stopping the fighting, in that it at least reduced the fighting and prevented more atrocities from occurring, especially by shabiha. He also thinks that Kofi Annan's efforts to oversee the passing of the Geneva communiqué in June 2012 were 'almost miraculous....It was a diplomatic tour de force. It was unbelievable.' He also commends the job done by General Mood in Syria with the UN observer force. Finally, he criticizes Western policy, and that of the US, in entering into battles with the Russians in the UN Security Council that did not help the efforts of the UN special envoy (both Annan and Brahimi).

Other Western and regional officials mentioned that Mr. Brahimi has not received enough support from the international powers. Senior Turkish officials blame not the UN in general or the special envoy for Syria, but rather the UN Security Council for not being able to act upon the situation. In addition, one blames the different understandings of Geneva I and II

on the part of the US and Russia. As he stated, 'In this environment what can Brahimi do? Not much at all. Lavrov and Kerry are still playing games, and the country is being destroyed.'

The response to this question from two high-level UN officials are reflected in the following comment by one of them: 'I think there were serious attempts from the very beginning, but maybe there wasn't enough appreciation of the complexity of the situation. At the end of the day, it's not the UN that has the power of actually deciding on solving things, solving conflict – it is some components of the UN, but not the UN itself.' Both point to the failure of the UN Security Council to act, as one stated: 'Pushing the Council, pushing those states, big states, to act. It didn't work, but it's not the failure of those who tried.' One specifically mentions that the failure of the Security Council to adopt the Geneva communiqué was a big missed opportunity. The other said the withdrawal of the observer force (UNSMIS) was a critical mistake because the conflict spiraled out of control after it left. An important point one UN official made is that the Syrian conflict was constantly evolving, from a popular uprising to an armed rebellion to a sectarian war involving a number of outside powers, so it was difficult to keep up with much less control the diplomacy surrounding the conflict.

The Present

Question 1: What are your biggest concerns right now regarding the conflict?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Syrian government officials' concerns revolved around the destruction of the country and the loss of what they believe Syria stood for, i.e. the secular state that provided for and protected religious and ethnic diversity. They also expressed concerns that the country could breakdown and become Somalia-like, with fears of the subsequent massacres of Alawites and other religious minorities in the country. They also fear the longer the conflict continues the more sectarian it will become [interview in February 2013].

A high level Russian official commented in an informal interview that the Syrian conflict had become a dirty war, with blood on so many hands that his concern is that it will be difficult to find anyone in any leadership position on either side without blood on their hands. He implied with this that the precondition, especially by the opposition, that it will not negotiate with anyone from the Syrian government with blood on their hands is impractical.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: For the internal opposition, by far the biggest concern was the potential disintegration of the country with ensuing chaos from which it would take a generation to recover. To some, the country was already past the point of no return, one saying that even if the opposition won, it didn't really win because all they would be getting would be a destroyed country. Many expressed the fear that the country would become another Somalia, i.e. characterized by dozens, if not hundreds, of warlords ruling over swatches of territory with no central government and general lawlessness. Many feared that Syria would become another Iraq with the total breakdown of the institutions of state, with a number saying that the army, government institutions, and even the Ba`th party and security services could remain in the aftermath of the fall of Asad (albeit under a reformed governing structure with those with the less desirable elements of each removed). In this vein, there was general agreement that not enough planning had been done for the future to prevent the breakdown and disintegration of the state following the fall of the regime. Others stated that getting enough arms – and the right type of arms – was a major concern so that the opposition would have the wherewithal to defeat regime forces. Having said this, one commented that while wanting arms he did not want to see a flood of money entering into Syria because it would corrupt the revolution, especially with different foreign countries backing different opposition groups, which may lead to another civil war when the regime falls. One opposition leader feared the rise of Islamic extremists and that they will fight the FSA as well as target minorities in Syria.

C. External Syrian Opposition: The external opposition figures that responded to this question focused as well on the fear of the Syrian state disintegrating. One said it could be worse than Somalia, with continued fighting and chaos long after the regime is removed. Another was concerned about the type of victory of the opposition, i.e. if Asad is killed the regime collapses precipitously, there will be 'an endless cycle of vengeance. A real civil war.' He added that, 'everybody is talking about the day after – we need to talk about the day before. The day before will draw [build] what is coming next.' He added that there is no vision among the opposition for the future.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Again, there was expressed a great deal of concern over the potential disintegration of the country, increasing sectarianism and revenge killings as well as general polarization between Sunnis and Shiites in the country and the region. Many expressed the fear that the conflict would continue to spill across Syria's borders into other countries and destabilize these countries, with some saying it has already started to happen (within this, some stated their concerns for the refugee population in and of itself as well as its effect on the country in which they are residing). A Saudi official's greatest fear was that the longer it takes to 'bring Asad down, the more radicalized the country will become and reconstruction will be harder... You are building al-Qaida 2.0. These people have experience in urban warfare and they will come back and haunt all of us. You could have a scenario where it becomes a training ground where people go for a year and come back and cause mischief.' This official did not believe that Syria would collapse in the wake of the fall of the Syrian regime, saying that, 'we have 100 local councils we are supporting. We keep civil society stable. Policemen, teachers, electricity workers. [It will not be like Iraq] because the situation in Iraq was because of self-inflicted wounds by the CPA [Coalition Provisional Authority].... When you take out the top four levels of every institution [as in Iraq], you are left with people who have no idea what they are doing.'

A UN official commented that he fears the destruction of Damascus, that on his way out Asad and his cohorts may destroy the city. Additionally he feared at the time of the interview [April 2013] the use of limited amounts of chemical weapons by the regime, which in his view could be used as a political bargaining tool, i.e. the threat of using bigger amounts could be utilized as leverage with foreign powers in some fashion.

A top Lebanese Druze expressed concern for the breakdown of Syria because of its importance in the region, and he does not want to see Syria become another Iraq, therefore efforts should be concentrated on keeping Syria together.

Finally, the Israeli position is worth noting: a top defense ministry official stated that Israel is not fearful or panicking; indeed, quite to the contrary, Israelis seem to be the only ones who think what is happening in Syria, beyond the human tragedy, is good strategically for Israel. He gave the following scenarios: 1) Asad stays, but he will be much weaker and illegitimate, and he will be busy with his own survival. He is weaker than three years ago, which is a good outcome ('The Syrian army was the only military, was the only country we prepared to fight conventionally. Very good artillery and missiles. This military is now melting. The SCUD missiles instead of flying to Tel Aviv, fly to Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib'); 2) The civil war goes on for a decade, so once again they destroy their own military. Not bad for Israel; 3) Syria disintegrates into sectarian enclaves, probably Alawite, Sunni and Kurdish, maybe Druze. No Christian enclave for sure. Each one of them is weaker than the old Syria, and 'I promise you a lot of continuation of hostilities'; 4) The opposition winning is a positive development because it will most likely be led by moderate Sunnis, and in any event they will be busy rebuilding for a long time; and 5) Al-Qaida or jihadist elements have a strong presence in a Somalia-like Syria would be troublesome but not catastrophic as some suggest. He believes that jihadi and other groups will be fighting each other, occasionally the jihadis will target Israel, 'but we can handle that from a well-defined border. Topographically we're very good. I am much more concerned about internal terror [Hamas, etc.]. We know how to deal with

terror. I'm not concerned about Sinai and Syrian terror. It's a problem, but compared with a nuclear Iran and three years ago [in Syria], we'll deal with it.'

Another former recent top-level Israeli intelligence official stated a concern al-Qaida groups could launch rockets into the Golan Heights area and reach Galilee/Tiberius. This would not really be a strategic threat, but a more a nuisance to Israeli tourists and those living in that area. He also stated that, 'I'm not worried about the chemical and advanced weapons because if the regime collapses...we can destroy it. Hizbullah wouldn't take it anyhow, and the regime, I don't think, will use against Israel. So I guess it's more tactical.'

Question 2: Will the Syrian government/regime be defeated?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Syrian regime officials believe they are going to win. However, it appears that Bashar al-Asad himself, in this author's own observations, has altered the definition of winning, i.e. he told UN officials in early 2013 that he would win by not losing. It appears that they understand they will not be able to assert control over lost territories any time soon, but they hold out hope that in the long term they will be able to do so. They believe that they have every right to receive substantial support from Iran, Russia and Hizbullah because the opposition is receiving substantial support from foreign sources; indeed, the uprising would never have started in the first place without these foreign conspiracies. They believe they have reached out to the opposition to end the conflict, but as stated earlier in the report, in their view there is no one representative of the opposition to whom they can negotiate.

One prominent pro-Syrian government Alawite figure [interviewed in July 2013] told us that at this point no one side can win or be defeated. What will happen in the end, in his opinion, is that an 'unannounced cease fire' will take place, and from there agreements will occur that re-shape the boundaries of the region, re-drawing the Sykes-Picot parameters. In his mind, people are beginning to realize that the Syrian government is not such a bad alternative, as he stated: 'All the areas ruled by rebels are worse than when the regime governed those areas. People in areas liberated by the rebels prefer to go back to regime areas, because of the chaos and corruption there [in liberated areas]. Still most Syrians prefer Bashar. The other reason why the regime will not fall is because its friends [Russia and China] will not allow it. For Russia and China, the Syrian regime is the last outpost in the region; it furthers their interests.' A Hizbullah figure predicted a prolonged civil war with negative impact on those involved and other countries in the region.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Most of the Syrian internal opposition answered an emphatic 'yes' to this question, although there was a wide variance on how long it would take [interviews were conducted in December 2012]. A number said it would be a matter of months, but this depended upon receiving adequate military support from its external patrons and/or the West, especially the US, aiding the opposition more robustly with military hardware (or if Russia and Iran stop aiding the regime). Barring this, it could take one or two years or five to ten years, depending upon who the respondent was. A few believe that the revolution would fail if the 'outside world abandons us,' or, in the view of others, it will simply become a long-term stalemate. Still others mentioned that they have been surprised by the resiliency of the regime, or that the regime's escalating military tactics were unexpected, therefore the defeat of the regime might take longer than they had originally thought. Almost all believe that the regime must be defeated sooner or later because, for them, there was no going back, so while there are a variety of estimates on how long it will take, they are reasonably certain that the regime will be defeated. In maintaining our contacts well into 2013 with several of those we interviewed in December 2012, given the continuing war with no end in sight, and given the gains by Syrian government forces in recent months, we have found more of a willingness to search for a way to end the war, implicitly suggesting more of a willingness to negotiate with the regime to find a political settlement. Whether or not these sentiments are shared by many more within the opposition is unknown at this time. Interestingly, we have found that a number of Syrians in exile who actually support the Syrian regime and

Bashar al-Asad also want an end to the war as soon as possible because money is running out and their living conditions are deteriorating; indeed, we were informed by some in Beirut that they even supported the idea of the US striking Syria (in response to allegations that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons in August 2013) because they thought this might end the war sooner rather than later. Finally, as mentioned earlier in this report, there were a few who said that the country has been destroyed so thoroughly that no matter who wins the war, there will be no winner.

C. External Syrian Opposition: The external opposition strongly believes that the Syrian regime will be defeated at some point, but as with the internal opposition, there was a wide variance on how long it would take, usually on whether or not the international community increased its support of the opposition and coordinated that support. Most believe that for the time being a military stalemate has ensued. One ex-high level Syrian official focused on the economic capacity of the Syrian regime, that it must be able to continue to pay public sector salaries; if not, the collapse of the regime within would be imminent, no more than 6–9 months. He added that the victor would only inherit a failed state.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Responses varied, but generally speaking most believe that Asad cannot last forever; however, they all have re-calibrated their time-frame as to when, saying now that it could take a very long time, from one or two years to a decade. One high level British official in London [in February 2013] stated that while the opposition can make some gains here or there, taking some suburbs of Damascus or even an airport, it really is not that strategically significant; as a result, he believes a stalemate has been reached and that the country will continue to fragment, leading to what he termed the ‘Lebanonization’ of Syria. Two Western officials in the region well-acquainted with Syria [interviewed in July 2013] believe the Syrian regime is confident and doing much better on the battlefield. As one said: ‘a friend of mine recently met with Asad, who said that ‘I have outlasted many leaders [and proceeded to list those regional and international leaders who are no longer in power] and will outlast the current leaders.’ They further state that the regime has kept key allies on board, and that the regime’s narrative of an Islamic extremist threat – partly as a product of deliberate regime policies – has now become a reality. One points out that the US narrative in terms of the Islamic extremist threat in Syria is very similar to the regime’s narrative. The suggestion is that because of all this, the regime might end up surviving in some form, which is its primary objective. One interesting point this British official made was that he believes the Syrian government forces are gaining more local autonomy, and local power-holders appear to have acquired more influence. The National Defense Army announced by the regime was an attempt to regularize the militias/shabiha and maintain some level of control over them.

A UN official states that the conflict will not end ‘abruptly.’ There will not be one day when one situation all of sudden turns into another. The continuing disintegration of the state will prevent this, and fighting and chaos will continue. He adds that, ‘sooner or later this regime, in this form, will be defeated. Does this mean an automatic end of some of the components of the regime? No. There will remain a fighting force....They still have some kind of financial abilities. They still have some kind of social presence in certain sects, in certain areas. So Bashar al-Asad might go, and there is no doubt in my mind that one way or another he will go.’

A senior Saudi official [interviewed in May 2013] believes the regime could suddenly collapse. As he stated, 'If Bashar dies everything falls. Maher [al-Asad, the president's brother] can't takeover. If Damascus falls, the Syrian state falls.'

The top Israeli ministry of defense official [interviewed in July 2013] believes the regime will lose, although he cannot say exactly when. He stated: 'The Asad forces strategically can't outrun the opposition. Iran and Hizbullah forces are under tremendous strain and can't keep this up. The Syrian regime chose the losing side in the region, i.e. the Shiites. Russia will inevitably throw the regime away.' A recent top Israeli military intelligence official believes Asad is going to survive for some time. He commented: 'What I want is for Asad to go. What I think is that he is not going. As long as the military, unlike Mubarak, is willing to kill for him, the military balance is 10 to 1 for him, and as long as he is protected from the outside by the Russians, he will survive. Maybe the economy will be a factor. But it's not the economy of France or Norway, when it drops two points people go to the streets – this is the economy of North Korea or Cuba. The Iranians are writing checks as well as the Russians.' A Jordanian official also reflects this last Israeli view, saying that 'basically the regime has not been doing that badly given the circumstances. The Syrian lira hasn't collapsed. It has lost a lot, but it hasn't collapsed. The Syrian army remains intact. The system, or the core of the system, is still functioning effectively. There hasn't been a significant defection....' He concluded by saying that at this point, no one can win, and there will be no return to pre-March 2011 reality in Syria.

Question 3: Does the opposition have enough power to defeat the regime?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: This question did not pertain to Syrian government officials. As stated earlier in the report, they generally believe they can still win, although winning might be for now just surviving. They are willing to let go large portions of the country in order to consolidate their position and hold on to major cities, with the hope that over the long term they will be able to restore territorial control to what it had been prior to March 2011. One prominent pro-Syrian figure commented that he does not think there will be any winner or loser at this point, as a destructive stalemate has developed.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Many of the responses referred to the revolutionaries having the will, commitment, and faith to defeat the Syrian regime, but they need weapons in terms of both quantity and quality in order to finish the job. Several believed that unless there was more international support a long stalemate would ensue, and it would take years rather than months to defeat the regime. Responses from two leading figures in the internal opposition flatly said the revolution would fail if they did not receive more support from the international community. Others point to the experience the revolutionaries are getting in terms of their military capability, but also in the areas of administration, medical care and so forth. One revolutionary commented that it would be difficult to defeat the regime because he believes that the US, Iran, and Israel are working together to support Bashar al-Asad. We asked how widespread this belief was among his fellow revolutionaries, and he responded saying seventy percent, stating, ‘when you can do something and you don't do it, that means you agree to that thing [the regime staying in power].’ Some believe they are getting enough weapons and money but it is not being evenly distributed, with the Qataris supporting one faction, the Saudis another, Islamist organization still other, and so on: ‘When Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey stop interfering, we will immediately create one military council.’

C. External Syrian Opposition: The few responses we received focused on the opposition having more success against the regime if they are united, if not, it will take a much longer time. One leading military exile [who is Sunni] told us that the opposition military needed to be re-organized in order to defeat the regime. He said the following: ‘Today the real problem, the military councils are mostly Sunni and Muslim Brotherhood is iffy. If you want the victory, it should be from a national army, not a Sunni army. A Sunni victory will cause civil war. The victory should be for a multitude of colors. The victory should not be for the Sunnis only. [Need to] bring in Alawi officers and Druze and Christian.’

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: There were not many responses to this question, but most of those who answered believe that the opposition can still win. However, many emphasized that they need more unity. One Egyptian official mentioned that they are using guerilla warfare against the regime, and that this will succeed eventually despite the divisions amongst the opposition. A high level Turkish official commented that the opposition will eventually win, although the conflict has settled into a stalemate for the time being, because Asad lacks legitimacy and no longer has the ‘consent’ of the Syrian people. A UN official offered that the opposition is hampered by 40–50 years of repression, and they therefore lack the political experience to create a unified movement (much less offer a viable vision for the future).

A top recent Israeli intelligence official stated that the opposition will not be able to defeat the Syrian regime without help from the outside. He mentioned the following [in July 2013]: 'I think [the] US is making a huge mistake. You lose control when you give away weapons. One day it will kill Americans. The only way to control the situation is to engage like Bosnia and Libya. The US is disengaging from two decade of wars. They need to consider another possibility, an air campaign. Asad doesn't have limitations for his power and conducting warfare like us in Gaza. Only way to help the opposition win is change the internal military balance, no-fly zone, change how he thinks.... This guy [Asad] has strategic patience. We, the Americans, the West, we have to change this perception that he will overcome this crisis. If he would have seen that every night an airfield, headquarters are bombed, I think he would consider the option to leave or reach an agreement.'

Question 4: Have attempts to unify the Syrian opposition been effective?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Two high level Syrian officials commented that there are no real leaders in the opposition, which is too divided. As one stated, ‘There is no one who if you remove them from the scene things will change on the ground. They are new. There was no political practice in Syria for a long time.’ The other top Syrian official said, ‘They are fighting with each other. Anybody who blocks dialogue is someone who want the destruction of Syria.’ This official added that anyone who places the precondition of demanding that President Asad be removed from power before negotiations is not serious about negotiating: ‘The president is not going to leave upon *their* orders.’ Both agree that the lack of unity in the opposition is preventing the emergence of a representative negotiating partner with the Syrian government.

A high level Russian official agreed that the opposition is too divided and Russia has been having a very hard time identifying leading figures of the opposition despite meeting with many opposition figures. He added that the fact that many in the opposition groups, such as the Syrian Coalition, have not been elected by the Syrian people that Russia cannot recognize them: ‘But we cannot agree to recognize the National Coalition as representative of the whole nation because who elected them? If they were elected through national elections that would be a different case.’

A Syrian government ambassador to another Arab country [interviewed in July 2013] commented that the opposition groups are too fragmented, and that a cease-fire in such conditions is ‘far from reality.’ As with all the other Syrian officials, he focused on the threat of Islamic extremism and the prominence of Islamic extremist groups, saying, ‘Look at the crime committed against the British soldier on the streets of London. This is the kind of ideology we are fighting.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The responses were given in interviews that occurred in mid-December 2012, shortly after the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was created led by General Salim Idriss.

The overwhelming response was that much more needed to be done. The SMC was a step in the right direction, as was the creation of the Syrian National Coalition in November 2012. The choice of Idriss was generally viewed favorably, especially as he was chosen by Syrians and not imposed from the outside. Moaz al-Khatib, then the head of the Coalition, was also viewed in a favorable light, but mostly as an honorable person rather than someone who might be a good leader or a unifying figure.

Indeed, most of the respondents commented that the opposition as a whole needed a much more centralized leadership in order to be more unified. Many mentioned that financial assistance and the provision of weapons was sporadic and uncoordinated, often controlled by different external actors (such as the Saudis, Qataris, Turks, French and Americans) rather than a centralized opposition authority. This was pointed to as the single most important element hindering the opposition's effectiveness. As one opposition leader pointed out: ‘Take for example the US. It might support someone who became famous on the Internet. This person in turn supports a specific group in Syria. This has lead to a splintered leadership.

These splintered groups are creating chaos. The haphazard way that support is distributed is creating problems.’ This person also mentioned that there are too many opportunists in the Coalition and other groups who are simply angling for more power and/or post-Asad positions. Another opposition leader mentioned that, at least in Aleppo where he was from, the FSA was not organized and did not have any institutional structure or laws and, in fact, does not really control that many fighters.

C. External Syrian Opposition: Most believe that not enough has been done to unify the opposition, either internally or externally (or between the two), and that many mistakes have been made. They point out that the lack of political experience inside and outside of Syria has severely hampered the ability of the opposition to unify. There is no command and control structure, no shared ideology, and no central fiscal source. They also point to the different foreign backers as complicating opposition efforts to unify. As one commented: ‘I am sometimes surprised that someone like the Qataris are insisting that the opposition should unify. They are fighting the Saudis and the Turks and the Americans and the Brits.’ In addition, several pointed to the fact that there is not yet a real leader (or group) of the revolution around whom the people could rally. Two leading figures both mentioned that Salim Idris only controls a small percentage, perhaps 10%, of the opposition fighters (one said 10–15,000, the other said no more than 20,000). One also called the new leader of the Coalition, Ahmad Jarba, a ‘criminal’ (having been imprisoned in Damascus for drug trafficking) and in the pockets of the Saudis. During interviews in summer 2013 it was pointed out that civil wars within the civil war are breaking out, such as that between jihadist groups and the Kurds, all of which reduces the ability of the opposition to unify against the regime. Again, several mentioned that the opposition army is too Sunni and must include more Syrian minority groups. One commented that the most important military groups are Jabhat al-Nursa, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and Ahrar al-Sham because their fighters have experience fighting elsewhere and are therefore more effective, therefore leading to more divisions in the opposition, so in effect, attempts to unify have not been effective at all.

One external figure working with a local organization that deals with the Syrian problem, told us that there are 2,354 armed militias in Syria [interview in July 2013; others have put the figure at around 1200]. He stated that there are five types of groups preventing the type of unity necessary: 1) jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; 2) more home-grown Syrian jihadist/salafist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and the al-Farouq Brigades; 3) FSA; 4) local militias at the community level; and 5) bandits/criminalized organizations looking for money and sometimes acting as guns for hire and are like Somali warlords.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: A senior Saudi official commented that the opposition is not experienced [politically]. He said the following: ‘I tell them you need more women, Alawites, and Christians...they need hard quotas’ [not token symbols]. Both a UN and a former US official stated that the opposition lacked political experience, which has hampered their ability to unify. The US official stated that this is understandable and perhaps the world has expected too much of the opposition given the circumstances (with which a high level Turkish official agrees), saying, there has been ‘insufficient appreciation of the fact that this was a country that was really in an induced coma...who were the first ones to be very, very efficient about applying the tools of the mukhabarat to the political system, and to

expect unity, teamwork, focus on a common mission was really expecting a bit much.’ The UN official added, ‘Worse still you have fighting groups that are not a product or extension of political parties or political groups. The worst possible phenomenon in this situation because you have gunners on their own and groups on their own practically.’ Many remarked on the lack of a centralized authority hampering opposition unity and coordinated activities.

Several mentioned as well the complicating factor of the Islamic extremist groups that makes the situation even worse. A senior Turkish official said that the opposition has to ‘deliver something to the people so that they can have legitimacy. Without having this, they cannot unify.’ Otherwise, he goes on, the opposition will continue to fragment, with local groups choosing their own leaderships. He states that the international community should have helped the external opposition more in order to help unify the internal opposition. A top Israeli ministry official commented, ‘Syria will be carved into autonomous zones with their own chieftains.’ A senior Jordanian official offered the following: ‘It’s a catch-22 situation. The opposition are fighting amongst themselves. There are three types of Syrians: one-third of whom are with Bashar, one third of whom are against him, and one-third of whom are on the fence. This last one-third is now increasingly sympathetic with Bashar. Because of the acts of others [Islamic extremists], this is an issue now, this second war with the extremists....’

Another high level Turkish official [interviewed in August 2013] did not believe the opposition has been as effective as they could have been nor unified, and it very much needs a strong leader. He told us: ‘Selim Idriss is a nice guy. Is he a leader? Not really. What this revolution lacks is a leader. The opposition as it is currently constituted will not inherit the state after Asad falls. As a body they are not eligible. They are not able to do this. There are in Syria, however, those who are able. These people are not affiliated, and they are watching to see who emerges on top.’

Question 5: Are there disagreements between the internal opposition and groups such as the Syrian National Coalition, i.e. external opposition groups?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: Generally, Syrian government officials and pro-Syrian officials from supporting governments and organizational figures believe that the external Syrian opposition is illegitimate because they have been hand-picked and molded by the West and its allies in the region, i.e. parties who are considered against the Syrian government and have been working to overthrow it. They all emphasize that they are willing to negotiate but with representatives of the internal Syrian opposition. As stated earlier in this report, however, they consider the internal Syrian opposition to be too fragmented and unable to offer up any representative body with which the government can negotiate. They acknowledge the tense relationship between the internal and external Syrian opposition.

A prominent Lebanese journalist covering the Syrian conflict [interviewed in August 2013] contends that the FSA is not truly representative and will be unable to attract support among the Syrian people as a whole. He told us that, ‘in the eyes of the [Syrian] population it is a Turkish puppet. The weight of history of Turkey in Syria is strong.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Note: the interviews with internal opposition members was held in December 2012, shortly after the Syrian National Coalition was formed, so most commented on that and/or the Syrian National Council, which was seen as preceding it.

A number of internal opposition figures we interviewed expressed hope that the Syrian National Coalition would succeed, but based on the composition of the Coalition, which to many respondents seemed to be composed of too many Syrian National Council members, they did not think all that well of the new organization. Many will support the Syrian Coalition primarily because it may be able to funnel more arms and money to the opposition on the ground and they realize that despite differences that the opposition as a whole has to unify in order to bring down the regime, but not particularly because they think it will offer effective leadership of the revolution. As one opposition leader commented, ‘The new thing [the Coalition] is a very bad wife, and I have to keep her with me because she is taking care of the kids. The new thing is not truly representative because it does not have the right qualification of characters.’ Several mentioned a wait and see approach, essentially they will judge the Coalition on whether or not it delivers on its promises.

Many respondents were openly disdainful of the new Coalition and the Syrian National Council that preceded it. They generally believe these organizations are divorced from the realities of the situation on the ground in Syria. They are not doing the fighting and dying and do not suffer the daily deprivations of war, so they should not expect to lead the new Syria following the fall of the regime. One opposition figure said that, ‘They [Coalition] will not come into Syria when this is over. They were not appointed by the people. Riyadh Seif is an American doll. Khatib is pure but he is being manipulated.’ Another elaborated, ‘I’m against the Coalition. They can go to European hotels and get created in Doha. Let them come and stand in the bread lines. My two brothers are in the Syrian National Council, but they don’t represent me. They stay in 5-star hotels and drink whiskey. The FSA represents us because they fight and die. Why are they in Europe? We have liberated areas. Instead of

spending money outside let them spend it on the kids in Syria. Anything from the outside, we'll make sure it collapses. Anyone not from the FSA who hasn't put their lives on the line, we want nothing to do with them.'

There were, however, a few internal opposition leaders who expressed support of the Coalition and even said they would submit to their authority if they took over following the fall of the regime. One mentioned, 'the people on the ground don't have a vision for the future. The people outside might. We are concerned with the here and now.'

C. External Syrian Opposition: The external opposition leaders who responded to this question acknowledged the often inimical relations with the internal opposition, i.e. that the latter do not think much of the former. One stated bluntly that, 'the National Coalition is essentially powerless and unpopular with ordinary Syrians. The leadership has no credibility.' Another leading Syrian exiled leader recognized that the 'connections' between the internal and external opposition groups are not very good or well coordinated. This person stated that, 'One of the reasons I left the SNC [Syrian National Council] was because there wasn't a formalized relationship with the FSA and people were building individual relationships with individual groups that they liked. It should have been balanced as a coalition rather than [a] political group.' One of the leading figures of the external opposition told us that, 'I can't say the opposition outside leads the opposition inside, generally, but some people or some small groups, maybe, have influence inside. Some people, for personal reasons, they have support inside because there is personal trust.' He adds that the main priority should be uniting the opposition groups inside of Syria, which, in his view, 'it's more important than outside. Outside is for political and financial support, but inside is very, very important.'

One leading Syrian military defector believes that each attempt to build a representative opposition organization on the outside is filled with flaws from the beginning, thus condemning the attempt to inevitable failure, and then everyone says, 'Oh, the opposition failed,' when in fact it never had much of a chance.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: A number recognized the flaws in the external opposition, either the SNC or the Syrian Coalition. One high level French official said that, 'We have a coalition with many flaws, but we need to build on it...what else do we have? US always says it isn't enough, but we don't have anything else.' A high-level British official believes that the internal opposition will be in a controlling position and understands the attitude of the internal against the external opposition, which he saw in Libya as well. As he says, the internal opposition will 'have the guns so they can exert control in their areas.' On the other hand, he contends that a series of fragmented internal opposition groups can play a significant role in any transition that may occur in Syria. As such, it may be that the political side, i.e. the Coalition or some facsimile thereof, can exert itself as a political interlocutor during a negotiated transition. Another British official commented that the external opposition has to deliver in terms of arms and money, and that they will be judged on this by the internal opposition groups. A UN official concurs, saying, 'any guy with a gun might be a problem and would want to participate in the decision-making and deciding on what's happening in his village or his area.'

A senior Saudi official believes the external opposition is not very experienced [see this person's comments from last question]. He adds, 'That's not the leadership of Syria. The future leadership will emerge from inside Syria. It reminds me of the Iraqi [exiled] opposition. They were running around and after three years we realized they had no support. The external opposition is useful in terms of public relations.' He also stated that Saudi Arabia is directly funding the FSA; however, 'you can't reduce the influence of al-Nusra. They have funding, fighters, and weapons from all over the Middle East. The only way to do it is to give funds and elevate the other guys to diminish their relative standing.'

The Future

Question 1: Do you think there will be fighting a year from now?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: This question was not posed to government officials.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Almost all of those interviewed [in December 2012] responded in the affirmative to this question. Some were less sure and two said the fighting would end within the year. Several were unsure, as it depended on whether or not they received more support from the international community. One said that even if the regime falls there will still be conflict over a year from the interview because ‘remnants’ of the regime will still be fighting: ‘I tell you, even after the regime falls, we will still be at war with the regime because this regime has roots and remnants [in society]. So you might come back a few years from now and you’ll still find us at war with the regime but in a different way. There will still be those who are loyal to the regime. Bashar can’t pack everyone on that plane.’

C, D. External Opposition & Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: We did not obtain many responses to this question in these categories of respondents, but those who did unanimously predicted that there would still be fighting a year from when they were interviewed [between February and August 2013]. Several said that some level of fighting would continue for 5–10 years, whether or not the regime fell in the near term. A US official commented that the increasing sectarian nature of the conflict ensures that it will continue for some time. An Egyptian official believes that the situation could very well spread into a regional war, which would last in some form for a long time. Three Israelis interviewed all said it would continue long past one year, one top defense ministry official saying that Syria would be ‘a total mess. Chaos. Proliferation of militias. Very small and unstable markets. Rubble. The Kurds will probably be semi or totally autonomous and yet do not see any Marshall plan for Syria and no responsibility for Syria [in the international community].’

Question 2: Do you think the Syrian government/regime could suddenly collapse? If so, what would be your biggest concerns?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A pro-Syrian government Hizbullah figure asserted fairly strongly that he does not think the Syrian government/regime will collapse suddenly, saying that the core of the regime is more united than ever, especially in response to the rise of jihadist groups. He told us [in August 2013]: ‘Many people insist on the idea that all the people who gather around the regime are more scared of the opposition rather than being supportive of the regime. Okay, whatever. He [Asad] has an internal social base. It’s a reality. Inside this one of the components of the social base are also Sunnis...It’s not only in the hands of minorities like some like to say. How he appears much more vigorous. He is his own man...He represents the sort of coalition of groups, but his position in this coalition is getting stronger again.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Many of the respondents told us that the regime could collapse but that there would not be an ensuing collapse of society nor chaos and lawlessness. A couple thought that there might be problems for a year or two after a regime collapse, but that Syria would recover. In saying that a regime collapse would not be followed by chaos, one opposition leader (a co-founder of the Homs Revolutionary Council) said the following: ‘As for the areas that have not been liberated, there are local cadres who will have to step up and assume leadership of something transitional. I know for a fact that in the areas that are not liberated there are sleeper cells on standby. Therefore, any fear of a breakdown in law and order is not justified. There are cells whose job it is to protect people. I am usually a pessimistic person, but I am now giving you specific information. In the areas that are not liberated, there are cells to protect and administer.’ He also said that the longer the revolution continues the harder it will be to affect this, especially as extremism grows. Another mentioned that the big fear after the regime falls is the continuing activities of regime loyalists, and another commented, as noted in the previous question, that ‘remnants’ of the regime would continue to fight.

Another military leader of the opposition, arguing as well that there will not be a total breakdown of society, stated that, ‘there are local councils that are administering public sanitation, food distribution, electricity and water and humanitarian assistance. Also the lawyers have organized themselves. They are ready to take over the running of institutions.’

Several gave the impression that existing and developing local councils and organizations cannot replace the state, but that they can keep things running adequately, such as electricity, water supplies, the distribution of diesel, and providing a police force, during a transition period until the point when a reformed state returns. One added that the culture of mistrust and ‘mentalities of exclusion’ generated by the conflict will be difficult to overcome. He said it would also be difficult to trust the West because it did not come to the aid of the revolution in the way they expected. One top opposition military commander predicted there would be about two years of chaos, generated mostly by poverty and hunger. He called on the international community to invest heavily in rebuilding Syria’s infrastructure and other types of direct investment in order to create jobs so that ‘people will think about jobs rather than creating chaos.’

Finally, several feared in the wake of the fall or collapse of the regime that there will be a lot of revenge killings. One Sunni Islamic shaykh opposition leader said the following would result with the collapse of the regime: 'Fear of [Islamic] extremist groups fighting against the FSA and the killing of Alawite civilians.' He said Druze and Ismailis should be safe, but that Christians may also suffer from revenge killings, but he does not think it will be as bad as Iraq.

External Opposition & Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Again, we did not receive many responses on this question in these respondent categories, so we will summarize. There were mixed responses to this. A UN official commented that the regime will not collapse in the traditional sense, asserting that it would instead be a slow death, saying that, 'I don't see a scenario whereby this is going to be a classic fall of the regime and dramatic change of goals and beginning of a new regime. It's not going to be like that.' An American official asserts that the regime is not likely to collapse anytime soon, but that when it inevitably does, he thinks Syria will become 'a regional death star. Syria just devolving into an utterly failed state. A real Hobbesian nightmare with all of the conceivable implications for the neighbors with terrorists of various stripes being able to feed off that carcass indefinitely....I fear we are seeing the end of Syria.' He added, however, that the 'ultimate nightmare' would be the survival of the regime. That would outweigh any negatives from the fall of the regime.

An Egyptian official says, 'like all dictatorial regimes, it can collapse suddenly but not in the foreseeable future.' A high level Turkish official says that the nature of a dictatorship is that it is a one-man show, therefore if he falls the whole system could collapse suddenly. But he doesn't believe there will be a total collapse of society with subsequent total chaos. He told us: 'Syria is not a failed state. It is not a banana republic....they have good bureaucracy, well-educated people, intellectuals. The remaining system [government]...will try to make a deal with the opposition, then we can start the political process. We faced collapse in Iraq, but it was forced disintegration. I don't expect total disintegration of the society and the state.'

Question 3: Are you concerned about the possible partition of Syria, perhaps along sectarian lines?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A top Syrian government official was unequivocal in stating that Syria will not and, in fact, cannot be partitioned. In his calculations, ‘you cannot find more than five percent who can accept the division of the country according to sectarian background – most of them want a united Syria.’ He mentions that even the Kurds want a united Syria. One pro-regime prominent Alawite said the following: ‘There won’t be segmentation of the country. The regime, opposition, everybody, the bulk of the population, is against segmentation. Syrians are against this.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The respondents were almost unanimous in saying that there is no chance Syria will be partitioned as a result of the conflict – and emphatically stated that even if there is a chance it might happen or certain groups, such as the Alawites or Kurds, want to carve out an small state or enclave, that they will not allow it, and will take military action to prevent this. They cannot grant autonomy to a particular sect or group because if one gets it, the other will want it. A number remarked that the regime, after Damascus falls, will want to move to the Mediterranean coast to set up a de facto Alawite state, but the opposition will not allow this to occur. A number mentioned that the international community (particularly Turkey when it comes to the idea of an coastal Alawite state) would not allow the partition of Syria. Some see the possibility of some sort of federal state, particularly for the Kurds. Only a couple mentioned the reality that Syria could be partitioned, but more along the lines of Lebanon rather than divided into formal independent states. One is concerned that if this happens that there will be forcible evictions of populations because Sunnis and Alawites live side by side in a number of areas, particularly in Latakia and Tartus on the coast.

C. External Syrian Opposition: External opposition figures were on the whole more concerned that partition could happen, especially the longer the war goes on. They do not necessarily think it will be formal partition into states but rather the natural result of a chaotic post-regime environment, with de facto states developing or, in the opinion of one, ‘1500 emirates, [a] Somalia on the Mediterranean.’ Although acknowledging that Syria could partition or fracture the longer the conflict endures, one leading opposition figure thinks that Syria is difficult to divide and that it is not like Lebanon. He said the following: ‘Lebanon is 30% Sunni, 30% Shiite, and 30% Christian, [so] it is possible to fracture it. Syria is 80% Sunni, which is why partition is not likely. Of the 2 million Alawis, 1.25 million are in Damascus and 800 thousand on the coast. That’s why they are attached to Damascus.’ One leading opposition figure believes the regime might push for an Alawite state if it is losing, but he doesn’t think it will happen – and even most Alawites don’t like the idea. To the contrary, he points out that many opposition fighting groups are purposely not attacking minority enclaves, villages, etc. so as not to feed into the regime sectarian narrative and strategy and not to alienate groups such as the Alawites. One asserts that partition cannot happen without ethnic cleansing because the different religious sects and ethnic groups are too intermingled, i.e. Syria is too integrated.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: Again, there was concern that there might be an uncoordinated disintegration of Syria rather than formal partition, with the growth of warlords and fiefdoms developing rather than clearly defined territories. The longer the con-

flict persists, the more chance that this type of fracturing will occur. A senior Saudi official believes the country will not break-up, stating that the ethnic balance is too unequal with 75% of the country being Sunni. His main concern is 'how do you make the government so that they [minorities] participate and don't suffer.'

An Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member [interviewed in April 2013] says that partition could indeed happen, but that the position of the Egyptian MB and the Syrian MB are aligned, i.e. they are categorically against the partition of Syria: 'We do not want sectarian or regional divisions. What we hope for is for Syria to remain unified. The quicker that the struggle is ended the more likely Syria will remain unified, and the longer this delayed the more likely divisions will grow. The Muslim Brotherhood, in consultations with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which represents an authentic core within the Coalition and the Syrian National Council, say very clearly that there must be a democratic vision that includes all sects...and maintains a united Syria....'

A top Israeli ministry of defense official commented Israel only wants to know 'who holds what' if Syria should fracture: 'The jihadists are very dangerous, and we need to guard Jordan, but ultimately we can't and don't want to influence things. Our preference is irrelevant, but it is easier to deal with one rather than many, but if it is a sinister one like Bashar, it is easier to deal with pieces. If Syria breaks apart, the international community does not have the energy to remap the region.'

A leading Lebanese Druze figure was concerned that the Druze of Syria might be encouraged or compelled to form their own enclave, which he thinks would be a mistake. He is steadfastly for maintaining the unity of Syria, although he recognized that the Kurds might claim an autonomous state.

Question 4: Is there a possibility of a phased transition? If so what would it look like?

****Note:** This narrative primarily reflects the general sentiments of the parties without going into that much detail. It is also important to note that almost everyone from each of the respondent categories agreed that some sort of transition had to take place; however, the nature and timing of that transition varied greatly.

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A high level Syrian government official states emphatically that the main problem is that there is no one on the opposition with whom the government can negotiate, no one that is representative of the opposition as a whole and who is not in the pocket of outside powers. As he stated, ‘when this armed group leader get close to the government side or a common vision [is] put on the table, the sponsor of him [outside power] cuts him off. In three or four days there is a new leader. There is no real model for him. There is no real leader.’ Regarding pre-conditions, he says the opposition should ‘show how much influence they have on the ground. I cannot talk to every party. There are hundreds of them.’ He adds that any negotiating process needs a mediator between the two parties until they are ready to sit together at the table.

A Syrian government ambassador to another Arab country comments [interview in July 2013] that before peace can occur the foreign powers have to stop supporting the ‘terrorists’ with weapons and money; ‘all groups in Syria are terrorists.’ He also says any dialogue must be between Syrians, although he implied that this does not include those opposition elements that are fighting. The US, he adds, can help bring about peace through Geneva II, and the Syrian government is open to dialogue. He says the Syrian government is ready to present in Geneva a ‘major reform plan.’

A pro-Syrian government Alawite contends that a negotiated solution will work only if the West, led by the US, decide that enough is enough and will ‘sit for talks.’ He implies that the US and Russia must first agree on negotiations, because if it is the opposition and the regime at first, it ‘will be theatrics.’

The senior Russian official's position is important, so he will be quoted verbatim for the most part. He began by regretting the fact that the UN Security Council did not pass the 2012 Geneva communiqué. He said there were still differences on the position of Asad: ‘Regarding President Asad, here on a very high political level in Moscow we have been saying the presence of Asad in power is not a necessary precondition. Moreover President Putin said ‘The Asads have been in power 42 years, maybe that has been enough.’ but when our western colleagues are saying that we have common approaches, we have tactical differences. We are asking what are these kind of tactical conflicts and they say Bashar al-Asad. We are saying that no we don't have any tactical contradictions with you. You have those contradictions with him. You say ‘go’ and he says ‘no.’” He adds that there is a great deal of concern on who replaces Asad should he be killed, and in discussions with opposition leaders in Moscow, he told us that they informed him that Asad would win the largest bloc of votes (15–20%) if a free election were held in Syria. On this issue he closed by saying, ‘We would like to see a truly democratic Syria. Not the country which existed 20 years ago but a democratic country,

with multiparty elections which respect women's rights, human rights. We just wonder what type of Syria the absolute monarchy in Saudi Arabia would like to see. That is the question.'

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Most of those interviewed [in December 2012] agreed that a transition was needed but also that Bashar al-Asad (and his partners in crime, so to speak) had to leave before the process began. Most would not want to sit down with him or anyone in the regime with 'blood on their hands' during the negotiations that may precede a political transition. Many wanted most aspects of the state to remain in order to prevent a total breakdown, although they would have to be reformed sooner or later and vetted. A number of opposition leaders believe that Syrian Vice-President Farouk al-Sharaa would be one of the few regime figures of note with whom they would sit down and negotiate, although there were a few that did not think that even he was a good choice. Some have said since then that since Farouk al-Sharaa has apparently been sidelined by the regime in a recent Baath party regional command shake-up (July 2013), that they would need to find someone who has authority and has the ear of and direct access to Asad before they would sit down with him/her. But anyone deeply implicated in the regime in terms of the bloodshed, such as Maher al-Asad, the Makhlof family, or Ali Mamluk, cannot participate in any dialogue or negotiations according to a number of the opposition figures.

A number of the opposition commented on the lack of trust of Asad and other government figures, as one said: 'Only stupid [people] can accept the idea that the fox will give a guarantee that he will not eat the chicken. You cannot believe it.' He added, though, as well as some others, that they would be willing to 'sit with him' as long there is an understanding that he will go. On this point, the opposition we interviewed was fairly split between those who believe Asad and his supporters should face justice (preferably inside Syria because as one said, it will help with the reconciliation process) versus those who don't care what happens to him, just as long as he leaves in order to stop the killing as soon as possible – they are willing to look the other way should he decide to leave the country.

Most agree that what the transition will look like and what might emerge on the other end has not really been considered, as they are more involved now in the day to day struggle of war and toppling the regime. One thought the Yemeni model in which the president handed authority to the vice president and was granted immunity, was a good one, another said it was not because Asad must be tried.

A few stated steadfastly that they would not negotiate at all with the regime, i.e. that it must be defeated on the battlefield. Others believe, and we think increasingly since we interviewed them, that the conflict will only come to an end via a political settlement, one however in which there is widespread reform and one in which Asad is gone, certainly before or maybe even during any transition process.

C. External Syrian Opposition: The external opposition seemed to be more amenable to a negotiations process or dialogue with regime figures, even Asad. Some respondents pointed out that demanding that he step down before negotiations even begin was a strategic mistake. They acknowledge that there are differences among the opposition regarding the role of Asad and when he should go. Almost all recognize that the conflict by August 2013 will end via political settlement or else the country will be totally destroyed and/or fragmented.

Most emphasized that in order for this to happen, the international community, especially the United States and Russia, need to take the lead in order to not only come to agreement among themselves, but in order to compel and lead their respective Syrian clients to the negotiating table and beyond. One top opposition figure commented that one of the problems is that too many on each side still believe the military solution is the only solution. Once this is on the decline, which in his view could be very soon, then a political solution becomes more viable. He added that ‘if there is a feeling of partnership, they [regime] will come to the negotiation. First, you have to convince regime people they won't be killed. Second, you have to convince them that they will have a role.’ Asked if there was any scenario where Asad would stay in power during or after a transition, one opposition leader said the following: ‘It won't work. Why would Maher [al-Asad] and Rami [Makhlouf] accept that? It is more likely, he would want to leave and they stay. But...[if he left] he [Bashar al-Asad] would be killed by them. He has a small circle of guards who will kill him the moment they know he is leaving because their fate is tied to him.’ Many doubt that Asad could participate in any sort of transition period, as one leading military defector stated that, ‘he cannot be part of the solution. He has put himself into being the problem itself.’ He added that, ‘both sides should learn how to lose their extremist sides.’

Some told us that they believe that for the Geneva meeting to work there need to be secret talks between the parties, possibly Track II, to reach key understandings before any formal Geneva meetings; in essence, they contend that the proper foundation had not been established before announcing the Geneva meeting in May 2013. One leading opposition figure, considered a moderate with regard to negotiating with the regime, made the point that the Geneva communiqué should act as the basis for negotiations, but that its ‘weak points’ needed to be addressed/fixed. He said that the main weakness is the lack of Saudi and Iranian participation.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: A high level French official reflected many of the viewpoints of the respondents in this section by saying that there can be no military solution, only a political one that leads to a transition. He states that, ‘for a political solution, you have to restore a type of balance,’ and both parties need to work for a solution, but he doubts that after so much war and bloodshed that anyone of note would be willing to accept this. He suggests that the international community, as France has been doing, needs to step up its efforts to make the opposition more inclusive and better able to provide for the people in order to control the more radical Islamic groups. A high level British official was concerned about the Alawite position in any sort of transition, and that there might be the need for some sort of Alawite force to protect the Alawite community. He also asked ‘how do we get him [Asad] to go? What's the carrot, what's the stick?’ Others believe there is no way Asad will go, he will never delegate powers to a transitional body. A Jordanian official believes that the extremist factions on each side of the conflict have become more and more dominant, and the regime and people like Selim Idriss are therefore becoming more and more hostage to these ‘crusading’ factions: ‘So their hands are tied. A successful Geneva II is to strike a grand deal that has Russia and the US fully onboard, brings in the others...’

A senior Saudi official contends that there can be no negotiated settlement unless both parties want it, and so far Asad does not: ‘The only negotiated settlement is his surrender, but you have to change the balance of power to get that. I don't see anything less than the

death penalty for Asad....You could have worked out an amnesty in June last year [2012], but it's too late.'

A UN official emphasized that any Geneva process/transition must be phased, first with acceptance to negotiate, an agreement on a government, reforming institutions, a national dialogue, a new constitution, new election laws, etc. A top Israeli official agrees, but says that there is less than a one percent chance that any of the three steps necessary can happen (have a meeting, have an agreement, implement agreement).

All contend that Asad at the very least has to transfer real authority to a caretaker government, even if he somehow remains as a figurehead president. Some point out that the Geneva communiqué does not specifically spell out that Asad has to leave; indeed, there are no pre-conditions in this regard; however, according to a former high level US official, he does not see Asad staying at the end of this process when he is stripped of all real governing power: 'So if Geneva operates according to design, the result is regime change. Complete.' He contends that the Russians do not want full passage of executive powers to apply to the office of the president, which in his view does not make sense.

A senior Turkish official agrees that Asad has to go, but he is also concerned with the transition period in that it must be comprehensive, covering the intelligence sector, the military, the political system, etc., and that the transitional body must have all powers of the state conferred upon it. He agrees with the UN official that the reforming process should come in stages.

Many agree that conditions just are not ripe for a political settlement or a Geneva process currently. A Western ambassador in the Middle East told us that nothing is likely to happen until there is a 'sufficient stand-off' or stalemate. He added that, 'The truth is we can't get the people we want to Geneva,' i.e. those with real power on the front, 'either because we hate them more [than the regime] or we can't persuade them to go.' Another Western official in the region concurs, i.e. the opposition needs to become more united, representative, and develop common positions. He asserts [in July 2013] that US-Russian dialogue 'is going nowhere.' A former top Israeli intelligence official believes that in order for a Geneva process to work that the Russians and the Iranians need to be brought onboard, but he doubts this will happen in the current environment because, in his view, the Russians are very much in cold war mode, and Syria is 'the line in the sand.' To him, it will ultimately be decided on the battlefield, and then at that point there will be some sort of political settlement. A Jordanian official agrees that it is bad timing right now for a Geneva process, and that, in fact, in May 2013, when the Lavrov-Kerry announcement was made, that it was the worst timing for this because the opposition, with Moaz al-Khatib having so recently resigned, was in no shape to respond to this without any real leadership.

The Arab League official we interviewed was categorical in saying that the Arab League strongly opposes a continued role for Asad. As he states, 'it remains unthinkable to have a role for him. He cannot lead the country. He is hated too much.' He seems to suggest, however, that at least on a personal level, he may be backing away from this, as he told us, 'now, people have to be more humble in our expectations. Never in my wildest imagination did I expect it to drag on as it has.'

Question 5: If Bashar al-Asad leaves, will there need to be a deep purge of regime elements?

Question 6: Should the Baath party and mukhabarat be eliminated?

****Since these two questions are similar and were usually answered as one question, we are including the responses to both here, which in any event, are somewhat limited in scope.**

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: There was obviously not a Syrian government response to this; indeed, we did not even ask the question. However, a senior Russian official somewhat addressed the issue by saying the following: ‘The dismantling of all the governmental structures. That came as a surprise for us because from the very beginning our US colleagues have been saying we should maintain these institutions as they are, we shouldn’t destroy them, we should keep these ministries.’ He seems to suggest that US officials have been pushing for more restructuring or dismantling than he thinks should be done; whatever the case, it is clear that Russia does not want the breakdown of the state or society and therefore wants to maintain the basic institutions of the state at least until reforms are implemented.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: There was no general consensus on this; however, most said that a number of institutions, including the army and security services (and even the Baath party) could not be completely gutted or the state would implode. As one opposition leader told us: ‘I want to preserve the structure of the army. We don’t want to become Somalia. The army preserves the aura of the state but it needs to change fundamentally. When the army is restructured, the Alawites will have no role at all. I am talking about as commanders, as officers. If they [Alawites] stay there will be trouble.’

Several were adamant that the heads of the security services should be removed in addition to members of the Asad and Makhlouf families and any other leading officials who were instrumental in the crackdown and bloodshed.

C, D. External Syrian Opposition & Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: There were not many responses by these categories of responses, but those that did focused on the fact that the entire system could not be brought down, that the basic institutions of state had to be preserved in order to prevent total chaos. The bureaucrats need to stay, as opposed to what happened in Iraq.

Question 7: Are you concerned about Shiite influence? Are you concerned about the relationship with Iran?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: We did not ask this question of Syrian government officials, however a pro-Syrian Hizbullah figure gave us the following interesting thoughts: ‘Hizbullah from the beginning was for Hizbullah...one of the main reasons of their intervention [in Syria] was the Syrian support of Hizbullah [over the many years]. One of the main [goals] of the external intervention, from the beginning, was to punish Syria for its support of Hizbullah. The different western actors and the Arab Gulf states... was the support of Hizbullah. Hizbullah felt indebted [to Syria].’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The general feeling among those we interviewed (almost all Sunni) was that there was a general fear of the growth of the Shiite population in Syria, a process of systemic proselytizing fueled and funded by the regime and its Iranian ally. This was not seen as a cause of the revolution nor did most see it as an imminent danger as the Shiite population in Syria is so small, although when combined with the Alawites, it became more worrisome. Several pointed out that the Alawites and Shiites are not natural allies, and that the latter do not necessarily think the former are actually Muslims; indeed, all those who commented on this issue told us that the Iranian-Syrian alliance is solely based on political and strategic reasons, certainly not religion or ideology.

All mentioned that after the fall of the Syrian regime the new revolutionary powers will be compelled to maintain normal diplomatic relations with Iran because it is an important state in the region, but that the tight alliance built by the Asads will end or at least adjusted accordingly. Some mentioned that while maintaining relations with Iran, they would work to produce an ‘Iranian spring’ to remove the regime in Teheran. They were unanimous, however, in severing any relationship with Hizbullah, which they have come to see as synonymous with the regime (and this was in December 2012; no doubt this feeling has solidified as Hizbullah has come out more openly in its support of the Syrian government). As one opposition leader commented, ‘Hizbullah is finished from Syrian life.’

C, D. External Syrian Opposition & Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: The few who commented on this issue reiterated what was stated above about Iranian-Syrian relations, that it is more strategic than anything else. There were several comments on Hizbullah that were made to us in July 2013 that were interesting. One Western ambassador to an Arab country stated that, ‘Hizbullah are feeling strong, but it's not clear how much further fighting Hizbullah will do in Syria. Going to Deraa or Aleppo would be like Vietnam for them.’ Another Western diplomat in the region, somewhat counter to his colleague's viewpoint, stated that, ‘Hizbullah might have interesting views on transition [in Syria]. It has lost a lot of fighters, and it is facing opposition in Lebanon, as Sunni-Shiite tensions rise. It may think we need a way out of this.’

On Hizbullah, a top former Israeli intelligence official said that it is no longer a Syrian proxy. It is now (and has been under Bashar) more of an Iranian proxy: ‘Syria is only a channel. Hizbullah controls Beirut port, the airport and seaport. No doubt that Hizbullah is not the same Hizbullah. It's weaker, but it's still the strongest military power in Lebanon, and they showed that Israel is not the only interest they have.’

Question 8: Should minority groups, especially the Alawites, be concerned about revenge killings?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A top Syrian government official regretted the potential loss of the Syrian secular way of life, saying, 'secular people who belong to political parties [and] not to sects...are the future. The defining line now is 'Who is a Christian, who is an Alawite, who is a Sunni, who is a Kurd?' and this is terrible. This is absolutely disastrous for Syria...I don't know whether the agenda of the West, I don't know those who support such oppositions whether they really know what is happening or where it could lead to or whether they would like Syria to be destroyed and ruined because what is happening in Syria is really the destruction of Syria.' Again, the Syrian government strongly believes it is preserving a way of life, a secular way of life that protects the country's diversity.

A prominent pro-Syrian government Alawite stated that the Asad has gained more support from minorities as the conflict has progressed, and believes that minority groups will drift toward whoever can protect them the best. He contended that the Arab spring, which resulted initially in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and conservative Muslim groups in Tunisia and Libya (and some Takfiris in these countries) has forced the Alawites and others to support the Syrian government more in order to get protection.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Again, we urge the reader to review the entirety of the comments made by the internal opposition with whom we met in December 2012 in order to have a more complete understanding of their views on this potentially volatile issue. Many of the responses are very well thought out with specific examples of the challenges the country faces on this subject. Some responses are necessarily emotional and passionate, thus revealing important insights that can be better understood by reading the entire passages. The authors are also fully aware that we were perceived as a Western-backed project – and possibly perceived as much more than that – so some responses may have been geared for the ears of a particular audience.

Everyone with whom we spoke steadfastly does not want to see any revenge killings against any minorities, especially those thought to have been supportive of the Asad regime. Most emphasized that their opposition is against the regime, against the system, not a particular people or sect. Having said this, most realize that sectarian animosities exist and may continue to grow, and therefore some level of revenge killings will inevitably occur; however, most were emphatic that they and their organizations (such as the FSA) have implemented a number of steps to prevent any of this from happening before or after the Syrian regime falls. Several pointed out specific steps that various opposition armed groups have taken to protect, for instance, Alawite villages from retributive attacks from largely Sunni revolutionaries. Many went into some detail about their own individual acts (or witnessing of such acts) that protected minorities.

Many pointed out how Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Christians and others got along for centuries before the revolution began. They systematically blame the regime for adopting policies that have purposely exacerbated sectarian tensions, particularly in compelling the Alawite community to back the regime despite the fact that many Alawites before the uprising began were unenthusiastic about the regime. The authors sensed that it was a battle that the

regime was winning (or had won), but despite this, they were still trying to take steps to prevent revenge killings. Most pointed out that they very much want a post-Asad Syria that protects all minorities and allows freedom of worship. Several pointed to Quranic scripture and hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad to reinforce the inherently tolerant nature of Islam toward other religions.

A few, however, said that they were fairly certain that there would, in fact, be revenge killings – and possibly on a large scale. They definitely stated that the longer the conflict goes on and the more sectarian it becomes, the chances are greater for this type of situation to develop. We spoke with opposition leaders and fighters who were secular, conservative Sunni Muslim, and some self-proclaimed salafists, but no one who could be described as a jihadist of the Jabhat al-Nusra type. Several of those we interviewed across the religious spectrum were concerned about the views of these jihadists toward Syria's religious minorities, and that the more power the jihadists acquire, the harder it will be to prevent killings.

One representative response was the following from a Sunni Muslim with secular leanings who was one of the founders of the Homs Revolutionary Council: "There is overwhelming will on the part of the revolutionaries not to allow retaliation to happen against the loyalists. In our meetings, we say that anyone who committed a wrongdoing must be held to account in front of a court of law. We are saddened when we see prisoners executed. We understand that some get emotional. We believe this country is ours. Yes, there is hatred, but we know that if we are going to go down this road [of revenge killings] we are going to lose the country as a whole. Because of our fear over Syria, we are keen for there not to be massacres.' Several told us that the West has to play an important role in helping to make sure revenge killings on a mass scale do not occur, probably with some sort of international force protecting minority sect villages (especially, of course, Alawite). A few pointed out that the Alawite community, as a result of the conflict, are now well-armed and can protect themselves, and therefore there is no need to worry about mass revenge killings.

We could see that a few of those we interviewed did not have a very positive view at all of Alawites, but they still indicated they did not want to see retributive massacres. And then there were a couple who were a bit offended by our question, saying instead that we (or the West) should be more worried about what the minority Alawites are doing to the majority Sunnis in the country.

C. External Syrian Opposition: External opposition leaders mirrored the responses of the internal opposition leaders to a point, saying that there will probably be some retribution, especially against the Alawites, but that it will not happen on a massive scale. One commented that the Alawites were not traditionally fighters, but that the conflict has placed them in a position of fighting and therefore will incur some level of wrath as a result, but again, he does not believe it will be large-scale, especially if the international community provides some kind of protective force.

One leading moderate opposition figure said that, 'militarization means radicalization, which means Islamization. And when this happens Syria is finished.' He implied that this process is already well under way, and that as a result, there will be retaliatory killings against minority sects associated with the regime should it fall – or even in the interim.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: The few responses we received generally purported that there will probably be random acts of retributive violence, but that the international community must play a role in terms of providing some sort of protective force (one US official saying that Turkey could play an important role) for the Alawite community especially. A Turkish official commented that the opposition is primarily against the system, not against the Alawites, and he points to the lack of revenge killings following what happened in Baniyas against Sunnis by regime forces in the summer of 2013, saying there ‘there wasn’t retaliation. I mean, people did not just sharpen their axes and start killing intentionally....’

A UN official told us, like many others, that the longer the conflict goes on, and the more sectarian it becomes, the harder it will be to prevent revenge killings against minority communities associated with the regime should the latter fall.

A top Israeli defense ministry official said the following, ‘Massacres are already happening. Obviously it’s a terrible thing, but it’s not like Israel is going to run to rescue the Alawites.’ Another Israeli expert on Syria commented that he doubts anyone will follow the Alawites back to the mountains should they retreat there in the aftermath of the fall of the regime. As a result, any revenge killings will probably occur in mixed neighborhoods such as in Homs.

A Jordanian official described a more dire situation. He stated, ‘an Alawi massacre is going to take place. That’s why they will fight to the end, and with the additional support coming from Shia communities everywhere, they have good support. We need to keep in mind that Sunni-Shia relations have been horrible for the past 1300 years, but we kind of forgot about them for a few decades in the 20th century. But for 1300 years, they have been rubbish, and now all of that is being revived.’

A leading Lebanese Druze flatly said, ‘Of course, the Alawites are afraid. With reason.’

Question 9: Is there a possibility of Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: No responses on this issue in this response category.

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The representatives that we met from the internal opposition (none of whom were Kurdish) were unanimously and categorically against Kurdish autonomy. The primary reason was that if the Kurds received such autonomy, the Alawites and the Druze would then demand it, thereby undermining the unity of the state. As one opposition leader commented, 'I am against any minority becoming independent under the pretext that it is a special case. If we are to go down this route, every tribe will say that it is a special case.' Another opposition leader who talked about this issue stated that in his calculations, 90% of the Kurds want to stay a part of Syria, and only 10% want independence.

C. External Syrian Opposition: No responses on this issue in this response category.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: One UN official regarding the Kurds said that, 'they achieved what they have been seeking for a long while, and they had de facto, now, political autonomy without firing one bullet...without sacrificing their men and women. That factor, that group which is intact, which is armed, which is very well organized, which has a political maturity that, I would venture to say, would put the other elements of the opposition to shame. They have a much longer tradition in that sense. That issue, that factor will come to [the] fore once, as you put it, the regime falls, once there is a new reality....'

A high level Turkish official recognized that the Kurds had made a good bargain with the Syrian regime, essentially leaving Kurdish areas to themselves so that government troops could be concentrated elsewhere. He told us, 'of course it is their right, but they shouldn't be forcing too much. They may suffer. Also we are concerned with such eventualities. In a society, the demands and deals should always be based on the rightful and just approaches.... so far, there is a risk, but I don't think it is the dominant alternative for the future.'

Question 10: Will there be a new constitution?

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: There were very few responses overall to this question, and it was mostly geared to the Syrian opposition. Those who addressed the question tended to say that they favored a parliamentary over a presidential system, and that there must be some sort of process whereby the people choose or vote upon what type of system they want (following the fall of the regime). Several mentioned that Syrian constitutions from the 1950s would provide a better guide than the Baath party constitutions, especially the one overseen by Hafiz al-Asad in 1970. A number commented that the Turkish model (a secular Islamist state) was the ideal model. Several stated that the new state should not be based on Islamic law (sharia), while one more secular leader said that Islamic law could in fact provide a sound basis because its ‘creates harmony in society,’ although ultimately he would agree with the will of the people.

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: When a high-level Turkish official was asked regarding the preference by many in the Syrian opposition for the so-called Turkish model, he stated more than once that whatever system comes into place in Syria it should be based on Syria and not Turkey because Syria has a different heritage and history on which to base its political development.

Syrian Government Officials and Pro-Government Officials & External Syrian Opposition: No responses in this category.

Question 11: Will the new Syria be an Islamic state?

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A top Syrian government official believes there is no difference between Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al-Qaida: 'Anyone who doesn't want you to exist, who doesn't want you to practice something he doesn't like, he is al-Qaida. Anyone who can kill himself by bombing himself is al-Qaida. The West is practicing something that is schizophrenic – somehow you want to fight the Syrian regime that is your enemy by using a third party which is an enemy for you and him... the people who killed Americans on 9/11, who killed Europeans...the people who you are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq for a long time, they are now the people fighting us in Syria. I don't know if the Turkish role in Syria is anymore under the control of the European or American side. You lost control of the Turks.'

Another high level Syrian government official pointed to the examples of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, saying that these cases 'gave us an inkling of what the future could be. I think what Lavrov said yesterday is very precise – he said the French are fighting the people who they armed in Libya [in Mali].'

A top Russian official stated that the US simply putting groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra on the terrorism list 'doesn't solve the problem.' More needs to be done as far as helping bring about a political settlement before the situation spirals out of control.

A pro-Syrian government prominent Alawite commented that the only alternative to the Syrian government is an Islamic one, and if so there will be a 'huge Sunni arc stretching through North Africa...to Syria, Turkey, into Russia and China. They [Russia and China] are afraid this will trigger Islamic revolutions within their own countries.'

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: Answers varied on this issue, but essentially most said that Syria would not become an Islamic state, and if anything, Islamic law would only be applied in personal and family matters for Muslims. Again, a number pointed to Turkey as a possible model. The question turned to the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra and jihadist groups in general, and at the time of the interviews in December 2012, most told us that their influence was exaggerated, and that in fact the US designation of the group as a terrorist organization was a boon for them and made it difficult for more secular elements to criticize or oppose them within the opposition movement. There were a wide variety of estimates on Jabhat al-Nusra numbers, from 700 to 7000, but all said the longer the conflict continues, the groups adherents will rise. Several believe that Jabhat al-Nusra was created by the US and West because of their delayed support to the opposition, thus opening the door for more extremist groups. Some commented on how the Syrian regime was behind the emergence of jihadi groups by letting a number of them out of prisons, thus it would conveniently fit the regime's own narrative that it is fighting Islamic terrorists.

Several commented on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, most saying that it is stronger outside than inside Syria, while one opposition leader observed that it is well organized and may have a role to play in the new Syria. Many commented that neither jihadist groups nor the Syrian MB will have much of a role after the regime falls because the Syrian population and Syrian culture are predominantly moderate Islamic and will inevitably force these groups to

the margins. As one said, 'even our [Syria's] salafists are different to the salafists [elsewhere]. We as a people are not extreme.' Some of the opposition leaders were concerned about the influence of outside powers, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in terms of continuing their support of salafist groups even after the fall of the regime that might give them more power and influence than they actually warrant.

One leading opposition figure made the following comment: 'We killed a takfiri guy because that is not the Syria we want. Syria is like a carpet. It has many colors. Remove one color and it isn't a carpet.'

C. External Syrian Opposition: Several mentioned, as stated above, that the longer the conflict goes on the stronger the Islamic extremists elements will become, although most believe that the ground in Syria is not fertile soil for jihadist ideology or groups.

One external opposition figure blamed the West, calling the West 'happy' that the jihadists are being funneled to one territory to fight against a regime that it regards the enemy.

Another top figure in the opposition said that first and foremost, 'we want to finish this dictatorial regime. Everything after can be resolved.'

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: A senior Saudi official agreed that the longer the conflict goes on the more Islamic extremists will enter the fight. On the Muslim Brotherhood, he said the following: 'They duped everyone in Egypt. Look at Hamas, in Gaza? There's nothing in Gaza. The Asad regime purged the MD in the early 1980s. One of the reasons you find external opposition being MB and MB sympathizers is because when they fled Syria, they came [to the US]. That's why you have people like Hitto in Houston. Their roots are MB. It's ironic the US gave them shelter. Do they have deep roots in Syria? I don't think so... You don't have the abject poverty in Syria that forced people to join the MB in Egypt.' He added that Jabhat al-Nusra and similar groups in Syria have been smarter than the jihadi/al-Qaida type groups in Iraq, i.e. they have not tried to impose their ideology on the people in the towns or made 'wild proclamations. They portray it simply as an Islamist movement fighting against the regime. They still have the ultimate goal similar to al-Qaida. That makes them more dangerous.'

A former high level US official claimed that the Syrian regime welcomes with open arms the jihadist groups (and may be behind or at least directly contributed to their creation) because it fits the regime narrative or fighting armed Islamic terrorists and al-Qaida, and that the regime is trying to preserve the secular nature of Syrian society. Most commented in some form or fashion that the more chaotic Syria gets, the more it would be a breeding ground for Islamic extremism.

Question 12: What are your thoughts on the 2014 Syrian election [one in which President Asad intends to run for another seven-year term as it stands right now]?

****Note:** This question was added in the summer 2013 as it became an item of discussion in relation to the proposed Geneva process. As a result, we do not have many responses to the question; however, by accident, several respondents in earlier interviews addressed the issue on their own when talking about the question of transition in Syria.

A. Syrian Government & Pro-Government Officials: A top Russian official, based on his conversations with Syrian opposition figures, said that Asad would win an election with the largest bloc of votes, most likely because of the lack of other viable choices. A prominent pro-Syrian government Alawite also believe Asad would win an election, ‘he will win...by democratic vote, not by power. Now Bashar not only represents himself but the facade of a whole coalition confronting the Western coalition and conspiracy. He represents even more than he did before the revolution.’

Finally, a Hizbullah figure believes Asad would win a free and fair election with maybe 51% or 52% of the vote, not the 97–99% he usually receives. As he comments, ‘If we divide the Syrian population into three parts with a strong minority supporting the regime, a strong minority supporting the opposition, and everybody else, you can be sure that today [interviewed in August 2013] this everybody else – you have a majority who wants the return to normal life.’

B. Internal Syrian Opposition: The few who addressed this issue were adamant that any election in 2014 would not be legitimate; however, if things stay the way they are especially in terms of the security forces, as one said, ‘everything will remain the same. They will fool the West and say: we are doing democratic elections as you want.’

C. External Syrian Opposition: One prominent ex-Syrian government minister believe there should be a multi-candidate, free election in 2014, and he urged President Asad to adopt such a path. He obviously has not yet done so.

An exiled Syrian opposition leader considered a moderate told us that he told the opposition that they should be willing to accept Asad until 2014 but the Qataris vetoed this idea. It is his belief that if the opposition accepts that possibility of an Asad victory, i.e. accepting that he should run again, that Bashar must accept a transitional period with a prime minister from the opposition, with the goal of transforming the country into a parliamentary system. As he stated, ‘people are now really anti the presidential system...after 40 years of personalizing power in a man, people are against this kind of system.’

D. Neutral and Pro-Opposition Officials: All who responded believe an election in 2014 with Asad is not a very good idea, that if it actually goes through that it would be a sham election. Too much blood has been spilled for everyone just to lay down their arms, forget the past, and peacefully go to the voting booths.

A top Israeli official bemoans the tendency in the West to put so much importance on elections, and in the case of Syria whether it is held or not would not reflect a true transition

to democracy. Another Israeli official commented that it might provide Assad with some legitimacy, even in the eyes of some in the West.

A Western ambassador to an Arab country gave a great deal of significance to the 2014 election, saying, 'Assad will probably run and win, in a vote that may not be free and fair but has sufficient credibility to keep the Russians – and a substantial number of Syrians – on [his] side.' A top French official disregarded any election in 2014 because it could not possibly be free.

A former top Jordanian foreign ministry official thinks that under current conditions Assad would win the election in 2014 with 80–85 % of the vote.

Concluding Thoughts

Many aspects of the Syrian conflict are already well-known and have been written about and/or commented upon extensively by the authors themselves elsewhere. What we hope to provide here are potentially new insights and observations based upon the formal and informal interviews we conducted (and only those formal and informal interviews) as well as important points that may reaffirm certain assessments of the conflict or encourage a re-evaluation of existing assessments and sentiments.

It is clear from the wide-ranging and comprehensive sets of interviews conducted by the project team that there is anything but one over-arching narrative that describes the course of events of the Syrian uprising and conflict; indeed, there are many – and oftentimes diametrically opposed – viewpoints within a category of respondents and not just between different sets of respondents. No one has a complete handle on what is going on in an ever-changing and evolving – and more complicated – conflict that has domestic, regional and international dimensions. As one European diplomat told us, there are two wars: the real war being fought on the ground and an information war being fought on the airwaves, in the print media, and maybe most importantly in the social media. The latter has greatly complicated our understanding of the former, especially as the Syrian government, in the view of many, has been consistently losing the information war even while its military fortunes on the ground ebb and flow.

The primary objectives of this project, by presenting the views of the players in the conflict from their own conceptual paradigms, is not only to generate a more complete understanding of the Syrian conflict as narrated by the different players involved in it, but also to begin to identify areas of common ground or at least potential common ground that might act as a basis for a dialogue at some point in the future (see Appendix A, 'Common Ground Matrix'). We can also identify important areas of divergence between and among the parties involved.

Respondents' views about the origins of the Syrian uprising offer some interesting insights. There was at least a broad level of concurrence that there were socio-economic reasons that created a fertile environment for unrest. Almost everyone interviewed, however, and most importantly the Syrian opposition, were certain that the uprising would never have occurred unless the so-called Arab spring had taken place in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. This created huge expectations that what happened in these countries, i.e. the removal of long-entrenched regimes and/or rulers due to popular protests or an armed rebellion/revolution, could be replicated in Syria.

To the authors, ascertained from our interviews with Syrian opposition leaders both inside and outside of the country, perhaps the single biggest cause for the uprising in a long term sense was the perceived assault on an individual's dignity by elements or representations of

the Syrian government. At some point, in other words, a person had felt humiliated in some fashion, often most dramatically by arrest and torture by the Syrian government's security services, but also it had to do with injustice, the endemic corruption they endured in their lives as well as what they believed was a systemic lack of opportunity because others with links to, or somehow a favored position towards, the regime received more beneficial treatment and rewards. This was the single most tangibly profound observation by the project team in our interviews with the Syrian opposition, many of which were filled with a great deal of emotion. It was and continues to be a driving force in the protests, in the decision to take up arms, and maintaining the fight against government forces.

It is clear to the authors that a number of critical mistakes were made by many parties to the conflict at the beginning stages of the uprising. Most believe that nothing was inevitable about the uprising or its escalation into a civil war. It appears from interviewing a number of Syrian officials close to President Asad that he as well as at least some of his inner circle vacillated back and forth (between being conciliatory or defiant) over how to respond to the initial protests following the incident at Deraa in March 2011 and before his first address to the nation on the issue on March 30th. Of course, we all know that the Syrian president ultimately adopted the more defiant approach and blamed the uprising on conspiracies hatched by Syria's foreign enemies and terrorists, which has remained the public mantra to this day. The indecision in the beginning suggests that there may be elements still in the Syrian hierarchy that have a more moderate view toward the conflict and the opposition; however, the choice of a more harsh response to and crackdown of the protests may have been an attempt by more hard line elements within the government – or at least this was the unintended result – to force out or marginalize many of these moderate elements. Judging from the respondents comments, it seems the security forces got in the last and decisive word to Asad, i.e. they convinced the leadership that they could quell the uprising and defeat the rebels in a matter of weeks. After that, the reforms announced by Asad in his early speeches could then be implemented to some degree. As our interviews have shown, the regime greatly underestimated the resiliency and determination of the opposition.

We believe that the acceleration on both sides toward militarization of what began as largely peaceful demonstrations turned an uprising into an armed conflict and ultimately a civil war. From the point of view of Damascus, there had been conspiracies long in place against the Asad regime, mainly from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar due to deterioration in relations following disagreements on the issue of Iran and differences on leadership questions in Iraq and Lebanon. The regime's view of the world is one in which its traditional enemies quickly jump at the opportunity to weaken Syria, even to the point of removing Asad from power. It sees the events of the Arab spring as having created just such an opportunity, so from the very beginning there were powerful elements who minimized the socio-economic reasons for the unrest and adopted a defensive (some might say paranoid) posture poised to engage in a fight from the beginning rather than address the demands of the opposition, which they generally saw as pawns being manipulated by Syria's foreign enemies. The Syrian government was clearly taken by surprise by the intensity of the protests.

The opposition, in general, also made some critical errors. First and foremost was their incorrect assumption (as many in the West and its regional allies thought) that the Syrian regime would fall in a relatively short period of time. If the opposition did not think the regime

would simply fall due to large demonstrations a la Tunisia and Egypt, they certainly believed it would succumb to what was becoming an increasingly armed rebellion in summer 2011, especially after the US and its NATO allies obtained a UN Security Council Resolution and Arab League support that opened the door for direct military actions in support of the Libyan opposition fighting against Muammar al-Gaddafi. The opposition (and a number of countries, such as Turkey, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia) also made a significant mistake in assuming the United States, especially after President Barack Obama called on Asad to step down in August 2011, would take a more assertive role in militarily backing the fight against the Syrian government. More overt US support, as it was thought, would allow as well for more direct military aid from other countries supporting the revolution. The opposition in general failed to understand how much the United States had shifted its position on military intervention following the wars (and subsequent military draw-downs) in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with more focus on domestic issues by an administration that came to power in the throes of an economic crisis. The Libyan example was cited frequently by many parties to the Syrian conflict as a likely template for Syria, but it was wrong on many counts, including an understanding of the Russian position amid shifts in their leadership and their interest in maintaining support for the Syrian government. As a result, there has been a great deal of disappointment – even anger – against the West and particularly the United States in opposition circles (and bewilderment over US policy in many officials circles in the West and in the region) for a perceived lack of support – and to some, a feeling of betrayal. It is apparent to the authors that the United Nations is also paying a price for this, and many opposition leaders expressed similar disappointment in UN actions (or lack thereof); however, as several pointed out, most of all the UN officials we interviewed, the special envoys to Syria and their teams have been subject to the vicissitudes of UN politics and the support (or lack thereof) of the UN Security Council, where, as we all know, there has been staunch disagreement regarding Syria between Russia and its allies on the one hand and the United States and its allies on the other.

Because of the accumulation of all of these misunderstandings and errors in judgment, practically the universal response of everyone we interviewed was that in no way did they think that the Syrian conflict would last as long as it has. A number of interviewees mentioned that in their opinions the burgeoning unrest in Syria rose to a whole new level in or around June 2011, transforming what had been mostly peaceful protests into a sustained armed conflict. We concur. Indeed, in addition to what happened in Deraa in March, a defining moment may have occurred in the northern Syrian town of Jisr al-Shugur, near the Turkish border. It was here when the Syrian army decided to attack the town to punish those who were behind the massacre of over one hundred soldiers and security officers who had been stationed there. This is the very same town that was a hotbed of Muslim Brotherhood dissent in the early 1980s; indeed, it was in March 1980, in something of a prelude to the more notorious Syrian army attack against the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in February 1982, that government forces attacked the city and killed over a hundred Muslim Brotherhood fighters. The killing of the Syrian soldiers in 2011 may have been a settling of old scores. As news of Jisr al-Shugur spread throughout the country, the opposition began to adopt a much more militant tone and posture. In fact, a number of opposition leaders either from Hama or those who are more conservative Sunni Muslims still mention the events of the early 1980s as being one of the central elements driving their current animosity toward the Syrian regime.

Most of those interviewed during the course of our project (December 2012-August 2013) have come to the conclusion that the conflict has reached a virtual stalemate. Either side in the short term at least and barring any change in the military equation on the battlefield (such as sufficient and direct Western military intervention), cannot inflict a knockout blow on the other – not even close. And both sides know it for the most part. As such, many believe the conflict as it now stands may continue for another five to ten years barring some sort of political settlement. In this sense, it may be a mutually destructive stalemate. On the other hand, there are some opposition fighters, where continued violence, particularly experienced by those on the front lines, has actually had a moderating influence, as noted in the question matrix and interviews.

As a result of the stalemate, the conflict has also become more radicalized, with more and more extremist elements in both camps playing a pivotal role in setting military policy and determining diplomatic options. Both sides blame the West and its regional allies for extending the conflict to the point where it has become much more sectarian. This has opened the door for Islamist extremists and jihadist groups to enter the fray and assume a disproportionately influential position compared to their (unknown and perhaps exaggerated) numbers but due primarily to their military experience and prowess. However, the opposition blames the West for not doing enough to end the conflict sooner, thus creating an opportunity for extremist groups to fish in troubled waters. The Syrian government, on the other hand, blames the West and its regional allies for prolonging the conflict due to their extensive support given to the Syrian opposition, even pointing out the irony of a supposed alliance between the US and al-Qaida (whereas the opposition and some Western officials blame the regime for working in cahoots with al-Qaida elements to create an Islamic extremist threat consistent with its running narrative).

The biggest concern among the respondents from all sides was the continuing disintegration of the Syrian state, and that pretty soon there may be a point of no return (if it has not already been reached) in terms of saving the country from total breakdown. All sorts of examples were given in the negative: ‘we don’t want Syria to become another Iraq’; ‘we don’t want Syria to become another Lebanon’; and perhaps most sobering and increasingly the example of choice, ‘we don’t want Syria to become another Somalia.’ In other words, unless there is a decisive victory by one side or the other in the short term (which, in any event, may destroy the country during the process of winning decisively) or some sort of political settlement, the retreat of government authority combined with the fragmentation of opposition groups (as several respondents calculated there were between 1200 and 2400 militia groups) will generate a territorial mass governed by warlords and their militias, with borders virtually dissolved between Syria and its neighbors, causing more instability in those countries and enmeshing them in a Syrian ‘black hole’ as one official put it. Partition, i.e. distinct ethnic or sectarian zones with fairly defined borders is too pretty of a term to be applied to what lies ahead for Syria in the opinion of most respondents. It is more likely to dissolve into chaos, potentially accompanied by large scale revenge killings or even ethnic cleansing in attempts to create a more defined sectarian or ethnic sub-state.

The fragmentation of the opposition in general and the lack of unity in the internal opposition, the external opposition, and in the relationship between the internal and external opposition was identified by all parties interviewed as a major concern and a significant

detriment to the chances of the opposition gaining a military victory or presenting themselves as a viable negotiating partner in any sort of process that may lead to a political settlement. Further muddying the waters inside Syria has been the arrival of foreign jihadists, and the rising power of jihadist groups may have convinced the original members of the armed opposition that they may no longer occupy the catbird seat in the struggle against the regime. This has complicated efforts by various parties outside of Syria to find, much less organize, a representative opposition negotiating partner with which there are common goals in terms of the future of Syria.

The Syrian government leadership sees no credible options other than continuing the fight. To them, nothing viable has been offered, especially as most parties who are arrayed against the Syrian government insist on Bashar al-Asad being removed from power before, during, or soon after a transition period – with, of course, many still in the opposition committed to removing him by force. As such, the Syrian government seems to have pulled out all the stops in order to survive, having embraced high levels of support from Iran, Russia, and Hizbullah, thus regionalizing and internationalizing an internal conflict as Syria has become a multi-dimensional proxy battleground. In turn, should the Syrian government emerge victorious or survive intact at least in control of ‘little Syria,’ as one journalist put it, the fear is that it will be even more beholden to Teheran, Moscow, and Hizbullah for having contributed mightily to saving the regime.

Most sides at this point (with the possible exception of jihadist groups in the opposition) prefer a political settlement of some sort to end the conflict. A rising number in the opposition have become disillusioned with the course of events in recent months. Many Syrians on all sides are looking more and more to a solution that ends the war sooner rather than later and a return to normalcy. Most sides agree that some sort of transition will have to take place that results from a negotiated settlement, from that which exists today in terms of the Syrian political system to something else at the end of a transition period. There are dramatic differences between the opposition and the Syrian government on the nature, timing, and ultimate result of such a transition, one of the major differences having to do with the role Bashar al-Asad could or should play, if any. Obviously, the Syrian government believes Asad should lead a transition based on principles he has laid out, especially those contained in his speech in January 2013. Most of the opposition as well as the Western community and its regional allies feel quite the reverse, i.e. that Asad should have a minimal role at best and ideally should leave or be removed from power before the transition process even begins. There are many different ideas on all of this. One of the problems that some respondents have pointed out is that without an international consensus on the issue or, in the view of the opposition, leadership from the West (especially the United States), the proliferation of parties working on and paths leading to a negotiated settlement have occurred, as has the emergence of different regional and international players with different agendas working with different elements of the opposition, thus contributing to more of a fracturing rather than a coalescence of the opposition.

It is the strong feeling of the authors that a serious mistake made by the international community in dealing with the opposition is that it pursued an outside-in strategy rather than what should have been done, i.e. an inside-out strategy. What do we mean by this? An inside-out approach respects the inherent autonomy of the Syrian people to figure this

out for themselves with an assist from outside parties, i.e. assisting in a collective problem solving process. As stated in the introduction, the primary reason the project team initiated its sets of interviews with leading members of the internal opposition (meeting with them in Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey in December 2012) was that we strongly believed that they had been largely ignored by the international community, yet in our opinion they represented the real power within the Syrian opposition with the credibility and legitimacy they had acquired from actually doing most of the fighting and dying on their side of the conflict. We were repeatedly told by leading opposition military commanders, political and community leaders, as well as religious shaykhs with whom we met that we were the first group to give them ‘the time of day,’ to really listen to what they had to say, and to try to learn from them to enhance our understanding of the conflict. Western officials have, to a large extent, misidentified who the leaders of the internal Syrian opposition were by relying too much on hearsay as well as the instruments of the social media. For instance, there was an Institute for the Study of War report that came out in the summer of 2012 that was circulated widely in Western official circles by identifying dozens of supposed leaders of the internal Syrian opposition (with photos). The information was gleaned primarily from the Internet and other social media instruments. It did not fit with what we learned conducting interviews with the internal opposition. We met with only one person who appeared in the study, and apparently, he was a few rungs down the chain of command. The people with whom we met were carefully vetted by team associates who have spent more time amongst the Syrian opposition than any other party in our opinion. By adopting an outside-in approach, similar to what happened in Iraq with the exiled opposition community, the anti-Asad coalition in the international community first wasted valuable time that could have been spent supporting efforts to unify the internal opposition and facilitate the connection with external opposition elements. Data from the interviews support the view that the outside-in approach caused unnecessary confusion and friction among and between the various internal and external opposition groups, and opened the door for international partners with different political agendas to insert themselves into the diplomatic mix.

This is also why we made a point early on in our project to visit Damascus, in circumstances that were less than ideal to say the least, to meet with high level Syrian government officials. The West, perhaps, also failed to engage sufficiently with the Syrian government (in the same way it neglected powerful internal opposition groups), exemplified by the departure of virtually all Western diplomats from Damascus at an early stage in the conflict. The view from Damascus is often misunderstood or misrepresented, so it was important to learn a point of view that is too often dismissed in the West. We also met with a few more Syrian government officials working outside of Syria and a number who had recently been in the Syrian government. For obvious reasons, namely safety, we could not meet with an equal number of Syrian government officials to that of the Syrian opposition. We nonetheless believe we were able to obtain the necessary information and insights in this category of respondents.

Based on an overall analysis of the interviews, we believe the inside-out approach is still viable, although much more difficult to put into effect as the overall conflict has become more complicated, with more blood spilt on both sides, and many thus having become more invested in victory because of the feeling they cannot compromise after so much bloodshed. On the other hand, as noted above, the very complicated nature of the situation combined with the virtual stalemate in military terms has perhaps created an opportunity to do the necessary

foundational ground work to construct a representative critical mass of the opposition that establishes not only parameters for a negotiation framework but also a viable vision for the future. It is the strong feeling of the project team and most of those who we interviewed that the Geneva process (Geneva II) that was announced by Russia and the United State in May 2013 (based upon a promising but flawed Geneva communiqué agreed upon in June 2012) was more a shot in the dark than the product of a well-formulated and functioning process. A window of opportunity to do this right still exists. One of our original assumptions was that there should be a Syrian solution for Syria. All the interviews we have conducted, all of the information we have acquired has, for us, only confirmed our hypothesis.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We need to build on the negative common ground and the positive common ground between the two main combatants that we have identified during the course of our project (see ‘Common Ground’ section of Appendix A). A commonly held negative, for instance, is the shared desire to avert chaos or the disintegration of the state. A commonly held positive is to preserve the unity of the state. From this we can perhaps build a common narrative of the conflict, particularly its origins and early course of events. If we can find a mutually acceptable narrative, which may exist in only its broadest terms, it is a healthy start. This is only a beginning step, but it is a fairly non-threatening way to explore more common narratives and positions. It is a way to begin to identify the obstacles that have blocked progress toward conflict resolution.

By talking – and more importantly listening – to almost all of the parties involved in the Syrian conflict, in effect what the project has accomplished is to establish a venue for these very same parties to have had a conversation with each other. If distributed to all parties, this report could be a starting point for that conversation. In the opinion of the project team, this conflict will have a long lifespan. As such, long term approaches supported by hard work on the ground whose participants and sponsors are satisfied with incremental progress is most likely the correct approach. The Geneva communiqué was a start. It called for a Syrian-led process, yet the very nature of the communiqué, the fact that it was put together by external powers, that no Syrians were identified with the process, that several of the most important parties were not present, goes against its intended purpose. Outsiders can play an important and positive role, but rather than leading and shaping the process, they should be helping the Syrians themselves generate an inside-out paradigm.

We suggest that in order to enter into a common narrative around which some obstacles to conflict resolution may be overcome, and in order to establish a foundation for agreeing on positive common ground a focus should be placed on dignity. Dignity for all Syrians. We have highlighted in this report that when the Syrian opposition explains why they are fighting the Syrian government, a common theme is that their dignity has been attacked and undermined. We believe that dignity is a universal constant. On the side of the Syrian government, the discourse portraying them as murderous thugs or vicious tyrants is similarly abhorrent. How do we restore the dignity of Syria? How do we restore the dignity of the individual? Of the community? A positive common ground may be to focus on dignity in four different aspects: 1) personal/physical dignity, i.e. personal safety; 2) economic dignity, i.e. making a life and having opportunity; 3) political dignity, i.e. the ability to participate in decisions that affect one's life and family; and 4) cultural dignity, i.e. respecting the diversity of Syria. One of the goals is to restore the dignity of all Syrians, as someone's dignity should not come at the expense of others. Perhaps it is around themes such as this that a dialogue can be constructed rather than the usual terms and frames of reference of negotiations that

immediately invite posturing, the adoption of extreme positions, and often lead to failure amid more acrimony. Instead, we will simply extend the conversation. We believe that the entire orientation around which the process toward a political settlement has been framed to date must be re-oriented. Perhaps it can be re-oriented toward a process that focuses on the concept of dignity.

For the research project itself, we believe that we have accomplished many of our initial goals, namely that of giving a voice to many actors involved in this conflict, and to understand more about the obstacles and possibilities for a political solution. We also believe that the conversation can be expanded and converted into some practical steps forward. We propose a second stage of the project that will offer a new set of targeted questions that not only take into account significant changes in circumstances since the project's inception but also deal more specifically with identifying interests and uncovering potential avenues toward political settlement. In essence, we propose first to conduct interest mapping and interest analysis in order to determine what the parties to the conflict really want, what are their real objectives, what will they bend on, what will they hold fast on, what is their specific vision for the future, what they want in terms of governance, education, economy, social issues, etc. Questions that could be termed 'negotiation questions' could help determine negotiation parameters and ways to deal with competing interests. Asking many of the people we have already interviewed what questions *they* want to ask in this regard will help us formulate the question control group. We can thus begin to identify what William Ury calls 'golden bridges,' i.e. potential pathways to help individuals and groups find their own way from antagonistic positions toward a facilitating environment for dialogue and agreement. It is in this fashion that we can begin to reconcile political interests and perspectives, which themselves are expressions of people's needs, desires, emotions, dreams, and ideologies. This can go a long way to restoring dignity. A process of translation from the objective of restoring dignity into a reality will be mapped out, ultimately, the anticipated formula being the following: Translation → Realization → Sustainment. The proposed second phase of our project will focus on translation, and it will design the parameters for next steps toward realization and sustainment.

In the course of this 2nd phase, there will be an examination of the possibility that co-existence between the various religious sects is no longer possible. Perforce could be a temporary separation between a 'regime state' and non-regime state(s), generally following the contours of the military boundaries as they exist currently, with expected small fluctuations. Options will be considered/studied on what to do if this is the case.

We also propose working in tandem with groups we have identified that will provide the support, operational frameworks, and tools to complement our work. They will help us map out the interests by beginning to help those on the ground identify their own interests and help them translate these interests into building golden bridges that could feed into any sort of mediation initiative. Of course, we propose to do all of this in conjunction with any sponsors who share our perspective and approach.

Appendix A: Common Ground Matrix

It is important to note that many, but not all, areas of common ground exist in the broadest sense only, and that once one digs a little more deeply, the views diverge quite dramatically. It is also important to note that there are a diverse set of views on any or all of these questions. We are simply identifying what we have determined to be important convergences and divergences between what we think are important elements of the Syrian opposition (and its supporters) and important elements of the Syrian government (and its supporters).

Question	Convergence	Divergence
1. Question 1: From your perspective, what are three reasons why the Syrian uprising began when it did?	1. The effects of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt 2. Relative lack of economic opportunity.	1. Opposition is also angry about the perceived assault on their dignity and the repressive response of the security apparatus. 2. The government places most of the blame on external actors.
Question 2: In your opinion, is there anything that the Syrian government and/or President Bashar al-Assad could have done at the beginning stages of the uprising/conflict to prevent it from escalating or happening at all?	1. Assad should have punished the governor of Deraa (Gov't officials hint at this).	1. The opposition generally points to what they believe was the lost opportunity of the regime concessions, particularly in Bashar al-Assad's first speech on March 30, 2011 addressing the protests. 2. The government laments their inability to foresee the uprising and the foreign conspiracy to destabilize Syria.

Question	Convergence	Divergence
Question 3: Has the Syrian conflict lasted longer than you expected?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most did not expect the conflict to go on this long. 2. The international community has played a role in prolonging the conflict (Disagreement as to who and how). 3. Militarization of the conflict (in the broadest possible sense) has extended the conflict. 4. Opposition disunity as a factor in prolonging the conflict 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opposition places blame on a lack of support from the West and too much support for the regime from Iran and Russia. 2. The government blames the West and regional actors (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey) for prolonging the conflict by supporting the opposition. (In a loosely similar fashion, the opposition has problems with the competing interests and lack of coordination between the West and its allies) 3. The opposition also sees the regime's brutality as a factor in prolonging the conflict. 4. Pro-government figure sees the militarization of the rebel movement as a factor in prolonging the conflict.
Question 4: What have been the obstacles to resolving the conflict?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Growing extremism makes resolution more difficult 2. Lack of unified leadership within the opposition; lack of single, authoritative leader of Syrian opposition. 3. Elements of the international community supporting one side or the other 4. Too much bloodshed has produced too much mistrust and an inability to compromise. 5. Evolving definition on each side of what winning means. 6. Elements on each side still believe they can defeat the other. 7. Too much focus on the day after Bashar al-Assad falls rather than focusing on resolving the conflict with Assad still in the process of negotiations. 8. Too many different agendas by outside powers being applied to the Syrian conflict. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opposition blames the West and its allies for failing to deliver on support that they are perceived to have promised. 2. The government thinks the West is punishing it. 3. The government and its allies don't think they have been given enough credit in their efforts to negotiate 4. The role Bashar al-Assad should play in any negotiations or transition. 5. The opposition believes the government has intentionally played the sectarian card, which has complicated the situation.
Question 5: Has the UN played a positive role? How, or if not, why not?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The UN's role has not been well received by either side – both sides see it as a political tool for powers that act against their interests. 	
PRESENT		

Question	Convergence	Divergence
Question 1: What are your biggest concerns right now regarding the conflict?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Potential disintegration of the country – both sides are fearful that Syria could turn into Somalia – and the breakdown of institutions The rise of Islamist groups and increasing sectarianism. The targeting of minorities 	
Question 2: Will the Syrian government/ regime be defeated?	<p>[Opinions have changed over time]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Some level of stalemate is acknowledged by many on both sides: Both sides see the regime losing control over portions of the country while still being able to maintain control over other parts. 	
Question 3: Does the opposition have enough power to defeat the regime?	N/A – Regime was not posed this question	
Question 4: Have attempts to unify the Syrian opposition been effective?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> No – there is a recognition that the leadership in the opposition is not unified. 	
Question 5: Are there disagreements between the internal opposition and groups such as the Syrian National Coalition, i.e. external opposition groups?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> There is general disdain for the Syrian National Coalition and other external groups by the internal Syrian opposition and the government. Individuals in the internal opposition and in the Syrian government consider the Coalition and other external opposition groups to be puppets of foreign powers. 	
FUTURE		
Question 1: Do you think there will be fighting a year from now?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> N/A – No consensus by either side on this 	
Question 2: Do you think the Syrian government/ regime could suddenly collapse? If so, what would be your biggest concerns?		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The opposition thinks the regime could collapse. Some think that they have the capacity to manage at a local level, while others are concerned that this would also precipitate broader societal collapse Pro-government actors do not think the collapse of the regime is possible because of how strong the regime’s social base is.

Question	Convergence	Divergence
Question 3: Are you concerned about the possible partition of Syria, perhaps along sectarian lines?	1. Nobody wants partition	
Question 4: Is there a possibility of a phased transition? If so what would it look like?	1. Both sides agree that a transitional process has to take place and that it will likely be precipitated by negotiations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opposition thinks that most, if not all, prominent regime figures have to leave before negotiations can begin. Some also think that these regime members should face justice. 2. The government says that there isn't a viable negotiating partner on the opposition's side. 3. The government also contends that foreign powers must end their support of opposition groups. 4. Syrian government officials think Assad should lead the transition process; Opposition members believe Assad should leave before, during, or immediately after the process.
<p>Question 5: If Bashar al-Asad leaves, will there need to be a deep purge of regime elements?</p> <p>Question 6: Should the Baath party and mukhabarat be eliminated?</p>	1. Institutions, such as the army, security services, and the Baath party, cannot be gutted or the country will implode.	1. The opposition thinks that significant restructuring must occur. Some think that Alawites should not be allowed a leading role in the new institutions, and current heads of some or all institutions should be removed, especially if they are seen to have blood on their hands.
Question 7: Are you concerned about Shiite influence? Are you concerned about the relationship with Iran?	N/A – No government response	
Question 8: Should minority groups, especially the Alawites, be concerned about revenge killings?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a strong desire on both sides to prevent reprisal killings against minorities, and both sides recognize that in a post-Assad Syria sectarian killings are likely. 2. Both sides emphasized the value in tolerating and protecting peoples of different faiths. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Many in the opposition believe that it has the capacity to protect the minorities and prevent the majority of these killings. 2. Many in the opposition also believe that this sectarianism is not endemic to Syria, but rather the result of specific policies adopted by the government. 3. The government feels that it is safeguarding a secular way of life that will collapse if the opposition wins.

Question	Convergence	Divergence
Question 9: Is there a possibility of Syrian Kurdish regional autonomy?	N/A – No government response	
Question 10: Will there be a new constitution?	N/A – No government response	
Question 11: Will the new Syria be an Islamic state?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both sides don't see Islamic law extending into every facet of Syrian life – the opposition thinks it could be applied in a limited fashion to personal and family matters. 2. Both sides have a strong fear of Jabhat al-Nusra and extremists, and interestingly, both sides think that foreign powers are playing a significant role in the success of these groups. 	
Question 12: What are your thoughts on the 2014 Syrian election [one in which President Assad intends to run for another seven-year term as it stands right now]?		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opposition wouldn't view the elections as legitimate. 2. Government and pro-government actors think that Assad's social and political base is <i>legitimately</i> strong enough to give him a victory in 2014.

