Reforming Syria’s Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era

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After nearly half a century of dictatorial family rule, Syria exploded into a popular uprising in March 2011. After early setbacks, including lost control over much of the country, the regime regained a solid footing in the face of a fractured opposition. Despite its apparent military strength, however, it is likely that the Assad regime, having presided over so much destruction and division, will eventually be replaced by a government with a better claim to legitimacy. Under the Assads, Syria acquired a well-deserved reputation as a repressive mukhabarat state dominated by vast, overlapping internal security agencies that operated with near impunity, reporting directly to the president. The security sector was both authoritarian and sectarian. Security sector reform will thus be a major factor in establishing the legitimacy of a post-Assad political order that abides by the demands of the uprising, establishing a civil, democratic and pluralistic state in which all citizens are equal before the law.

Authority over the security sector must be transferred to the people through their elected representatives, with no security units outside the law. The armed forces must be made subject to civilian authority, reporting to a civilian defense minister. Law enforcement agencies should be restructured as part of a national civilian police force, reporting to the interior ministry, and the intelligence services must be restructured, separating domestic and international services. These reforms will be challenging for a new government working to restore stability and likely facing possible spoilers from members of the old regime or extremist groups that flourished during the conflict. This is remarkable considering that the Assad security system was meant to end the instability that had previously characterized Syrian politics. After Assad, a reformed security sector will be central to building a better political system without sectarian and ethnic divisions.

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Introduction

At the time of writing, in early 2014, the Assad regime had the upper hand in its war against the Syrian people. Although state-society tensions in Syria had been simmering for decades, the malaise exploded into a popular uprising in March 2011 after nearly half a century of dictatorial family rule. Following a series of setbacks during the first two years of the uprising-cum-insurgency, the Assad regime succeeded in turning the tide, at least temporarily, in 2012 when it took the strategically located city of al-Qusayr. At the military level, the regime has been assisted by Russian arms, by Iran and by Hizballah fighters. It has maintained its stranglehold over Damascus and the corridor that connects it with Syria’s Mediterranean coastline via the strategic city of Homs. At the diplomatic level, the Assad regime was saved by Russian and Chinese opposition to a number of UN Security Council resolutions charging Syria with Chapter VII violations. Finally, the Assad regime was rescued when Russian President Putin intervened to help avert a potential U.S. strike against Syria in the aftermath of the regime’s chemical attack on Damascus suburbs on 21 August 2013 in which around 1500 civilians were killed. Assad quickly agreed to the Russian diplomatic initiative, acquiescing to the destruction of Syria’s vast chemical weapons stockpile and promising to sign the 20-year old UN treaty banning chemical weapons. Even in the battle for Western and domestic hearts and minds, Bashar al-Assad succeeded somewhat in portraying the conflict in his country as one between a modern, secular government and Islamist radicalism.

On the other hand, although the opposition arrayed against Assad took control of some 70% of Syrian territory, it was in a state of disarray, divided between those operating outside the country and those working inside. The expatriate political opposition, operating out of Istanbul under the umbrella of the Syrian National Coalition, was largely cut off from the rebels on the ground, who operate under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Although a “Supreme Military Council” was attempting to coordinate the FSA’s disparate units, the FSA’s moderate wing was overwhelmed by a steadily growing number of radical Islamist groups, most of which were fighting the Assad regime not for the establishment of democracy in Syria but to create therein an Islamic Emirate. Still, despite the Assad regime’s upper hand, this essay assumes that the Assad regime will eventually crumble. At best, the regime and the opposition will eventually hold talks, the result of which will be the establishment of a “transitional government” with full executive

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1 This was despite its loss of large swaths of land to the armed opposition in the northeast, much of the northwest, and most of the south of the country.
2 By most independent counts, the 21 August attack was the 14th in which the regime used chemical weapons.
3 Syria was thought to have the third largest stockpile of chemical weapons in the world. This includes approximately 1,000 metric tons of sarin, mustard gas, and other nerve agents. On why Syria developed chemical weapons, see Murhaf Jouejati, “Syrian Motives for its WMD Programs and What to do About them,” in Middle East Journal, Volume 59, No. 1, Winter 2005, pp. 52-61. See also, Murhaf Jouejati, “Syrian WMD Programs in context,” in Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East, James A. Russell, ed., (New York, NY): Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 64-67.
4 The largest among these radical Islamist groups are Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar, and Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Izz.
authority. At worst, the Assad regime will simply collapse, just as Gaddafi’s regime did in Libya. In the middle is the “Ali Saleh model” – the former Yemeni dictator relinquished power in exchange for immunity from legal proceedings. Whatever the case, the assumption that Assad’s days are numbered is not altogether farfetched. In addition to the fact that Assad has lost his legitimacy at the regional and international levels, he lost his legitimacy at the domestic level because of the violence he has inflicted on his people. Being responsible for the death of, as of July 2014, perhaps 170,000 Syrians, the displacement of 9 million others (including almost 3 million refugees) – one third of Syria’s population – and the destruction of three quarters of Syria’s infrastructure, it is hard to imagine that Assad would be able to rule his country for a prolonged amount of time. As Max Weber puts it:

*Without legitimacy, a ruler, regime, or governmental system is hard-pressed to attain the conflict-management capability essential for long-run stability and good government. While the stability of an order may be maintained for a time through fear or expediency or custom, the optimal or most harmonious relationship between the ruler and the ruled is that in which the ruled accept the rightness of the ruler’s superior power.*

In this particular instance, most Syrians no longer accept the rightness of Bashar al-Assad’s superior power. Evidence that the barrier of fear has broken is provided by the fact that the conflict is increasing in intensity nearly three years into the uprising. In this light, this essay looks beyond the Assad regime. More specifically, it focuses on the security system that underpins the Assad regime, how it evolved and, in employing a Weberian ideal type, how to reform it. Recognizing the difficulty that reforming the security sector entails, this essay attempts to predict the kinds of challenges that await a transitional government.

**The Security Sector under the Assads**

In the five decades since the Ba’th Party seized power in Damascus, Syria’s security sector had become increasingly instrumental for the survival of Syria’s successive regimes. Under Hafez al-Assad, Syria acquired a well-deserved reputation as a mukhabarat state. Indeed, state and society in Syria were dominated by vast, overlapping internal security agencies that operated with near total impunity and complete disregard for the rights and dignity of the Syrian people. By creating multiple elite units within the armed forces and the intelligence and security networks, and balancing them against one another, Assad ensured that no single unit or network would become a menace to him or arrogate to itself more power than was compatible with the safety of his government. Through extensive networks of informers,

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5 The United States and Russia agreed to a formula in June 2012 in which the regime and the opposition would enter into negotiations, the product of which would be a “transitional government with full executive powers.” The U.S. interpretation is that this formula excludes Assad. The Russian formula is that the transitional government would be under the roof of Assad’s Presidency.

6 Representatives of more than 120 countries and organizations meeting in Morocco in December 2012 recognized the opposition coalition as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people.


8 The term “mukhabarat state” was first coined by Professor Michael C. Hudson.
surveillance, and the routine use of repression, the Assad regime’s internal security apparatus has been principally responsible for maintaining the barrier of fear on which the regime’s existence depended. In these circumstances, it is no wonder that international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch would routinely accuse the Assad regime of serious and systematic abuses of human rights, including arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial executions.⁹

Under Assad’s tutelage, Syria’s armed forces grew dramatically, consuming almost 6% of GDP annually in the mid-2000s. Although the military underwent a process of professionalization during his presidency (1970-2000), Syria’s security sector became an extension of the regime and, to a lesser extent, that of the ruling Ba’th Party. The sector had little, if any, autonomy in terms of appointments, promotion, or decision-making, and had greatly disproportionate representation of members of the Alawi minority in key positions.

In his seminal book, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Hanna Batatu emphasizes the prominence of the security sector within Hafez al-Assad’s pyramid of power. According to Batatu, the chiefs of the multiple security networks stood one level below Hafez al-Assad, as were the commanders of the elite armed formations, such as the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, the Third Armored Division, and, before 1984, the Defense Companies. It is these formations, the only ones allowed into the capital, that constituted the essential underpinning of Assad’s power and not the regular armed forces, which since 1970 he had been increasingly at pains to depoliticize. Within this power structure, the Ba’th party command stood at the third level of power. Further below, at the fourth level, were the Council of Ministers, the people’s assembly, the provincial governors, the boards of local councils, and the General Unions.¹⁰

Little has changed in terms of Syria’s power structure since Hafez al-Assad’s passing. Upon succeeding his father at the nation’s helm in 2000, Bashar al-Assad maintained much the same arrangement, with only a few exceptions. Most of the commanders of elite units charged with the defense of the regime were replaced by younger ones. The Fourth Armored Division and the Republican Guard, both headed by Bashar’s younger brother Maher, are a case in point. From the beginning of the popular uprising until this writing, these units have been heavily involved in repression.¹¹

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How Did the Security Sector Evolve?

The size of the security sector in Syria increased exponentially after its formation in the aftermath of World War I under the French mandate (1920-1946). In 1945, one year before Syria’s independence, the *Troupes Speciales du Levant* numbered around 5,000, and the *gendarmerie* (a French-created paramilitary force intended to police Syria’s rural areas and combat political foes of the French Mandate government) number approximately 3,500. By April 1946, when the last French officers left Syria, the regular armed forces of the newly independent state had grown to around 12,000. Fast forward to 1985, when army regulars were estimated at 396,000 regulars, with an additional 300,000 reservists; the navy consisted of around 4,000 regulars and 2,500 reservists; the air force had about 100,000 regulars and 37,500 reservists. This increase was due in part to the general increase in population and in part to strategic necessity: Syria fought Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Syria also fought Israel in Lebanon in 1982 and maintained an armed presence there between 1976 and 2005. However, following the failed peace process between Syria and Israel in the 1990s and Hafez al-Assad’s abandonment of his concept of strategic parity, the size of the armed forces was trimmed. In 2010, they were estimated to be around 220,000 regulars and 280,000 reservists.

Throughout this period, Syria’s armed forces were plagued by sectarianism, politicization and factionalism. With regard to sectarianism, Syria’s social fragmentation was initially exacerbated by France’s divide-and-rule policies which included, among other things, the recruitment of sectarian and ethnic minorities into the army and their deployment in Sunni majority areas. Unwittingly reinforcing this pattern, most Sunnis stayed out of the *Troupes Speciales du Levant* to avoid being accused of collaborating with the hated French mandatory authorities. In the meantime, Syria’s minorities, Alawis and Kurds in particular, seized this opportunity which, for them, was the only ladder for social mobility. By the late 1960s, Alawi officers dominated the senior ranks of the military establishment.

With regard to politicization, the March 1949 coup d’état, in which Army Commander Col. Husni Za’im (a Kurd) ousted the civilian government and ruled directly, was Syria’s first in a long series that earned Syria the reputation of the most coup-prone state in the Middle East.

12 The *Troupes Speciales du Levant* (Special Troops of the Levant) were part of the French Army of the Levant. They were responsible for keeping order in Syria and in Lebanon – both under the French Mandate.
14 Ibid. pp. 258-259.
17 Sunni Arabs account for 59–60% of the population, most Kurds (9%) and Turkomen (3%) are Sunni, while 13% are Shia (Alawis, Twelvers, and Ismailis combined), 10% Christian (the majority Antiochian Orthodox, the rest include Greek Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Armenian Orthodox, Protestants and other denominations), and 3% Druze.
Before the year was out, two more in a series of what was becoming the classic “Syrian coup” occurred. The third coup thrust into power Col. Adib Shishakli who dominated the political scene until 1954. Although the coup leaders who ousted him subsequently returned the country to civilian rule and permitted, in the parliamentary elections of that year, a degree of political choice not known in Syria since, the military establishment continued to interfere in politics. Moreover, the military establishment was divided within itself. Army officers loyal to the Ba’th Party and to leftist politician Akram Hawrani wanted the speedy adoption of socialist reforms; other officers chafed for a chance to live in the presidential palace; a smaller number continued to support traditional political elements; and cliques based on geographic origin jostled with one another.

By 1957-58, a majority of officers came to judge that an appeal in the name of Arab unity to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser could benefit their various aims. They were quickly disappointed, however. Upon union between Egypt and Syria in 1958, Nasser shut down the Ba’th party and transferred some 700 Syrian officers to Egypt where his intelligence services could keep an eye on them. Moreover, the command structure Nasser designed to ensure Egyptian control over the Syrian officer corps caused great resentment among Syrian officers. Thus, on September 28, 1961, a secessionist group of right-wing officers seized control of the government in Damascus, only to be themselves overthrown in March 1963 by a rival, leftist group of Ba’thist officers. The massive purge that followed the Ba’thist takeover of power depleted the ranks of the officer corps, including some of its best officers. They were replaced by loyal but junior inexperienced Alawi officers, hardly the kind needed for the defense of Syrian sovereignty. As a result, Israel defeated Syria massively during the Six Day War in June 1967, occupying Syria’s Golan Heights in the process. The March 1963 coup was followed by an intra-Ba’th coup in 1965 and a counter-coup in 1970, the latter led by Hafez al-Assad.

What Needs to Change for the Security Sector to Win the Confidence of the Population?

It was with this instability in mind that Hafez al-Assad engineered the kind of security system that would be coup-proof. The upside is that Assad gave Syria the kind of political stability it never had. The down side is that stability came with a price: the security system he engineered is both authoritarian and sectarian. It is authoritarian in that the extra-judicial elite units and intelligence networks of the armed forces answered directly to Assad – with no checks on his authority. It is sectarian in that Assad allotted the most strategic posts to family and to fellow clan members, along with those whom he could trust. For the most part, these were drawn from Syria’s Alawi minority and within the same socio-economic milieu to which he belonged.19 They were loyal to him in part because of clan solidarity and in part because of the ill-gotten material wealth he allowed them to accumulate. In a nutshell, and for the purpose of this essay, the major things that need to change in Syria’s security sector are its authoritarian character and its sectarian nature.

19 On the sectarian composition of senior ranking members of the security forces, see Batatu, Syria’s Peasantry, pp. 225-230.
Reforming the Security Sector

While reforming the security sector involves many organizational changes and practical improvements, it is above all a matter of governance. Reforming the security sector is imperative for the success of Syria’s transitional government and a major factor in establishing the legitimacy of the new political order and winning the confidence of the population. To be legitimate, the transitional government is required to abide by the demands of the uprising: the establishment of a civil, democratic and pluralistic state in which all citizens, regardless of their sectarian or ethnic affiliations, are equal before the law. Thus, in line with these democratic aspirations, Syria’s security sector needs to lose its authoritarian character and its sectarian nature. The people, or at least their representatives, are to exercise their authority over the security sector by appointing the individuals that are best equipped to provide security and appropriating the funds necessary for such an undertaking. In other words, the security sector needs to be apolitical. Furthermore, Syria’s security sector must be inclusive of all Syrians, regardless of their sectarian or ethnic background. In this regard, an inclusive security sector has a salutary effect on society: Just as the Troupes Speciales du Levant exacerbated Syria’s social fragmentation, an inclusive security sector is likely to strengthen national cohesion. By empowering minorities, it gives them a vested interest in rebuilding a nation torn by decades of social division. In short, reforming Syria’s security system requires the restructuring of the armed forces into a professional army under civilian control; the consolidation of apolitical law enforcement agencies; and the establishment of new, apolitical intelligence agencies.

Restructuring the Armed Forces

First and foremost, efforts to reform Syria’s security sector must focus on the armed forces. Because elite units and elite formations have operated outside the law with little, if any, accountability, it is imperative that the power they exercised under the Assad regime (father and son) be transferred to the Syrian people through their elected representatives. In keeping with democratic norms, the armed forces must be subject to civilian authority. The armed forces are to be the guardians and protectors of Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, dedicated solely to the provision of the nation’s security against external threats.

In light of this, depending on the type of political system Syria adopts in the post-Assad era – whether that system is presidential or parliamentary – the transitional president/prime minister is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the ultimate authority on defense policy. The respective heads of the armed forces (chief of staff of the army, navy, and air force) report to the president/prime minister through the defense minister – a civilian official responsible for the formulation and implementation of defense policy and the overall management of the armed forces. As such, the defense minister works with the individual heads of the army, navy and air force to develop functional and balanced civil-military relations.

In addition, the transitional president/prime minister appoints the transitional defense minister and transitional chiefs of staff (military officers). Taking into account the military culture in
which Syrians are embedded, the position of defense minister can be entrusted to a respected senior retired officer, but only during the transitional period. Moreover, the appointment of the transitional defense minister and transitional chiefs of staff, together with the allocation of military budgets are proposed by the transitional president/prime minister and approved by the transitional parliament. In turn, the transitional defense minister, the transitional chiefs of staff, and their senior subordinates inform the transitional parliament of important policy decisions. Only by creating a transparent and accountable government in which all sectors work together can a lasting democratic regime in Syria be achieved.

In this scheme, the size of the armed forces is determined by the national civilian leadership according to the requirements of military strategy and assessments of foreign threats. Given the history of abuse by elite units under the Assad regime (father and son), its members would be required to undergo training regarding professionalism, rule of law, respect for human rights, accountability and civilian authority.

In addition to restructuring the armed forces, a major priority for the transitional government must be the integration of FSA fighters into the security apparatus. An effective strategy to allow pro-democracy coalitions, like the FSA, to continue its invaluable efforts should combine civil and military support to ensure its loyalty and an effective command. In accordance with established international practices, FSA fighters will have access to a program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. As appropriate, FSA fighters will be integrated into the armed forces or the national police (further below) throughout the transition.

Reforming the National Police/Law Enforcement Agencies

The security sector in Syria is poorly governed in part because of the structural weakness and marginal status of the interior ministry. Within this context, the transitional government needs to elevate the interior ministry to a place of primacy in the state’s security structure. In addition, the transitional government must establish a National Civilian Police Force (NCPF) to enforce the rule of law and to protect the citizenry from the turmoil that will likely ensue after the fall of the Assad regime. In order to ensure an open channel of communication, the NCPF will work closely with the ministry of justice in maintaining public order and controlling crime. In this scheme, the head of the NCPF reports directly to the interior minister and is responsible for day-to-day police operations and citizen protection. In turn, the interior minister provides for a modern, efficient police force based on democratic principles under the guidance of a suitable institutional framework to ensure the development of a professional police cadre.

The interior ministry shall also include a Major Crimes Bureau which would be responsible for investigating (in cooperation with the ministry of justice) organized crime, including the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, people, and nuclear materials, as well as terrorism and

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20 “The Day After”, pp. 77-78.
21 “The Day After”, p. 78. The restructuring of the armed forces includes the removal of corrupt and incompetent members.
subversion. In order to ensure open communication and fluidity, the director of the Major Crimes Bureau reports directly to the interior minister. In addition, the interior ministry will house other civilian security functions such as border police, customs police, and immigration authorities.

In terms of organization, the transitional president/prime minister will nominate the transitional interior minister (civilian) and this selection is to be confirmed by the transitional assembly/parliament. In turn, the interior minister appoints the chief of the civilian police and the chief of the Major Crimes Bureau. The police budget is to be proposed by the interior minister in consultation with the president/prime minister and approved by the transitional parliament. Communication between these departments is crucial for the success of the transition and for future democratic rule in Syria. In order to ensure collaboration, the transitional interior minister, the chief of NCPF and the chief of the Major Crimes Bureau will inform the transitional parliament of major policy and operational issues.

Following proper vetting, armed rebels and unarmed civilians may be integrated into the NCPF. Given the complex history of the police forces in Syria, the reform of these groups should be extensive and multifaceted. Their training must include a range of professional skills, such as criminal investigation and nonviolent crowd control, as well as instruction regarding human rights, the rule of law, accountability and civilian authority.

Reforming the Intelligence Services

Under the Assads, intelligence agencies committed serious and systematic abuses of human rights and controlled citizens through repression and fear. As in other branches of the security sector, the intelligence services have been severely corrupted by illicit activities permitted and even encouraged by the old regime. Because a functioning, secure, and rightfully informed intelligence service is critical to the success of the transition, the transitional government must abolish Assad’s multiple and overlapping intelligence agencies and establish a new intelligence apparatus in accordance with democratic principles. Abolishing the existing intelligence structures and constructing a new one is one way the transitional government can demonstrate to the bulk of the population its commitment to building a society based on democratic principles, transparency, and accountability.

New External Intelligence Service

The transitional government should establish a National Intelligence Agency (NIA) to conduct research, analysis, and foreign intelligence operations. This agency’s mission should be apolitical and concerned exclusively with the assessment of threats from abroad. The NIA will provide the transitional leadership (including the leadership of the armed forces) with actionable intelligence. External operations can be carried out only with the express authorization and oversight of the president/prime minister. The transitional chief of the NIA will be nominated by the president/prime minister in consultation with parliament. The NIA budget will be proposed by the president/prime minister and approved by parliament. The transitional chief of NIA will keep parliament informed of major policy and operational issues.
The transitional defense minister should establish military intelligence departments within the various armed services (Air Force, Army, and Navy). These units should provide research, analysis, and operational intelligence to the armed services. These departments should be apolitical and charged exclusively with assessment of tactical intelligence directly related to operations of the respective branch and the assessment of military-related threats. The departments should provide the civilian and military leadership of Syria with actionable intelligence as required. Military intelligence units should not be involved in internal security, which will be the responsibility of the interior ministry. The functions of internal intelligence will be housed in the Major Crime Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior. The new intelligence services will not interfere in political affairs and will be led by civilian directors. The reorganization of the intelligence apparatus will reduce the number of existing personnel. Rehabilitation and vocational training will be offered to personnel released as a result of the downsizing with the aim of reintegrating them into society. The heads of the military intelligence departments should be named by the defense minister, in consultation with the chiefs of the armed forces, and the funds for these departments should be included in the regular Defense Ministry budget.

The Challenges Ahead

Reforming Syria's security sector promises to be a long and daunting process. It will be a major challenge to instilling a democratic culture into a military establishment that has been socialized in the imposition of martial law for five decades. Preventing regional and other powers from forming and paying off factions within the new security sector will be another challenge. Moreover, just as reforms in the security sector are likely to engender a stronger sense of national identity, so will democratic reforms alienate remnants of the regime who have a vested interest in the status quo ante.

The large scale and extensive scope of the security sector in Syria, the legacies of its role in the repression of society, and its responsibility for much of the violence that has accompanied the popular uprising will pose major challenges to its restructuring and to the overall transition to democracy in a post-Assad Syria. These challenges underscore the importance of security sector reform as a centerpiece of transition. Other challenges depend on when and how the regime falls and on how prolonged and widespread the fighting becomes. Immediately after the collapse of the Assad regime, the transitional government will likely encounter a wide variety of urgent security challenges.

The day after Assad, there will, in all likelihood, be major civil disturbances and large-scale looting across the country, along with revenge attacks by both pro- and anti-Assad elements. Amid the chaos, remnants of both the 4th Armored Division and the Republican Guard may seek to regain power and reinstall Assad. Other regime remnants, including the “Shabiha,” Ba’th Party militias, and other paramilitary groups will retaliate by using conventional

23 “The Day After”, p. 65.
weapons, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, and possibly non-conventional weapons to further destabilize the country. They are likely to use arms caches stored in Ba’th Party buildings and those of affiliated organizations. Finally, regime remnants may even seek to create an armed conflict with Israel along the Golan front to divert domestic attention from their destabilizing schemes.

Furthermore, independent militias are likely to refuse to come under the unified control of the transitional government’s civilian authority. Unauthorized armed groups, spoilers, and organized crime coalitions are likely to exploit potential chaos for private gain. Whatever the case, the prolongation of civil conflict in Syria is likely to increase the number of internally displaced people and the flow of refugees to neighboring countries, potentially overwhelming the transitional government’s ability to provide humanitarian relief. Without greater international assistance, this could culminate in a massive regional humanitarian crisis.

**The Extremist Challenge**

The disarmament and eradication of radical Islamist groups will be one of the most daunting challenges facing the transitional government. These extremist groups began to appear on the battlefield several months after the beginning of the uprising, filling the power vacuum left by Assad’s retreating forces. At first, most radical Islamist fighters were the same Iraq-bound jihadists that the Assad regime detained during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The Assad regime released them during the uprising to make the conflict look as though it was between secularists (the regime) and jihadists (the opposition). Shortly thereafter, their numbers began to swell as foreign jihadists joined the fray.

Initially, FSA members consisted of defected soldiers along with civilians who armed themselves to defend their families against Shabiha attacks. They were happy to work with jihadists who were well-equipped, well-financed and battle-hardened from their experiences in Iraq. Their foreign patrons did not hesitate to provide them with material resources, unlike the FSA which, until then, relied on small arms purchased on the black market and military equipment they captured from the regular army. Thus, as Kodmani and Legrand put it, “the Syrian revolution has not turned Islamist but is funded mostly by sources with an Islamist leaning, leaving revolutionary groups with a democratic bent struggling as orphans in terms of sources of support.” As resistance to the regime became militarized, sources of funding and the strings attached to them have shaped the landscape, not the other way around. Islamists now control the oil fields outside Deir-el-Zor as well as much of the region’s food and agricultural facilities. Al-Nusra Front, for example, made $40 million off the sale of heavy construction equipment it captured when it overran government facilities. Furthermore, radical Islamist elements control large swaths of land captured from the Assad regime, especially in the northeast of the country. Therefore, the greatest challenge to the

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26 Ibid, p. 11.
consolidation of the transitional government’s power and to Syria’s return to stability could arguably be dislodging these radical forces.

The challenge of the extremists, however, is not necessarily insurmountable. Syria’s brand of Islam is not of the extremist type. Regular Syrians have thus far staged a number of demonstrations in protest of the strict Islamic laws these radical groups have imposed in the territories under their control – evidence that Syria does not provide the kind of political/cultural environment in which radical Islamist groups can flourish.

**Conclusion**

The security system that Hafez Assad engineered, and his son and successor Bashar inherited, was meant to do away with the instability that characterizes Syrian politics. By centralizing authority, giving the security sector primacy in governance, and giving his family and fellow clan members top positions in the armed forces and the intelligence networks, Assad thought he could hold the reins of power. Although he succeeded for a long time, the system he engineered turned out to be the very instigator of instability he sought to avoid. The security apparatus became comfortable in its dominant position which, inevitably, led to the abuse of its power. It is precisely this that, over time, triggered the March 2011 popular uprising.

Syria now has the opportunity to change. It has the opportunity to transition out of an authoritarian political system fragmented by sectarian and ethnic divisions. The transition to democracy is not a given, however. Many challenges lie ahead. The prospect that Syria will fragment into mini-states is real. The longer the conflict lasts, the more real the threat becomes.
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