
THE NEW ARAB WARS

UPRISINGS AND ANARCHY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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For Sophia Faith and Alexander Reyes

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democratic transition posed by a security vacuum, continuing economic frustration, political polarization, and external meddling. One year in, though, it still seemed possible—and even likely—that revolutionary enthusiasm and international support would keep the transitions on track. Neighborhood effects seemed especially promising in North Africa, with mutually reinforcing progress by Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia creating the tantalizing prospect of a mostly democratic North Africa.

From the perspective of regional power struggles, however, it was less important that democracy was surviving than that Qatar was winning. Qatari allies had won every election thus far, winning commanding pluralities in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. Qatari proxies were well represented in the Libyan National Transitional Council and in the recently formed Syrian National Council. For Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, this could not be allowed to stand.

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SYRIA'S UPRISING

Syria's spectacular descent into disaster can make it seem like a completely unique case. But it was in fact fully embedded within the broader Arab uprising, shaped by the same forces and revealing the same regional pathologies. Syria's protestors were inspired by Egypt's and Tunisia's. The course of events was clearly shaped by the Libyan war and by competitive interventions by regional powers. As uniquely horrifying as its civil war has since become, it would make no sense to treat Syria as something uniquely outside the rest of the regional narrative.

Syria occupied a unique place in the Arab order. Prior to the uprising, Syria was Iran's only Arab state ally and the core of the "Resistance Bloc." A serious challenge to Asad would tilt the regional balance of power against Iran more than almost any other conceivable development. Syria's courageous activists would find it difficult to escape the implications of that regional reality. Asad's and Iran's adversaries would use every instrument at their disposal to intensify and accelerate the Syrian uprising. They would fuel its evolution into an insurgency, to disastrous effect. And, in turn, Iran would do everything in its power to ensure that Asad did not fall. As a result, Syria became the uprising most thoroughly consumed by the region's new war.

Syria's relations with the Arab order had ebbed and flowed over the years. Hafez al-Asad had portrayed Syria as a bastion of Arab nationalism and a core of the resistance to Israel. In 1990, Syrian forces had occupied Lebanon as part of a Saudi-brokered initiative to finally end the eight-year-long civil war. But Syria also maintained an enduring alignment with Iran. In 1980, it had been one of the very few Arab states to align with revolutionary Iran against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It connected Iran with Lebanon's Hezbollah, the most important of Iran's regional allies. As the region polarized along sectarian lines in the 2000s and Iran replaced Israel as the primary concern of the Gulf regimes, Syria's alliance with Iran shifted from an asset to a profound problem.

This shift in the regional order had led to concerted regional moves against Bashar al-Asad. Following the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Saudi Arabia supported the March 14 coalition, which forced the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and pushed for the formation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in order to tighten the pressure on the Syrian President. The United States fiercely resented Syria's facilitation of the flow of arms and fighters into the Iraqi Sunni insurgency. In 2007, Israel had quietly bombed an alleged Syrian nuclear weapons program.¹

Damascus presented itself as the center of Arab resistance to Israel and to American hegemony in the region. This was a popular position at a time of intense popular anti-Americanism and an unsettling one to the many regimes which remained closely aligned with the United States. Syria's regional politics afforded it significant popular sympathy around the region, despite the concerted efforts to isolate and pressure Asad's regime. No single change could have a greater impact on the Iranian-Saudi cold war than breaking the Syrian-Iranian alliance. In the years preceding the Arab uprising, multiple Arab powers had sought to entice Asad away from Iran. Saudi Arabia had rebuilt its relations with Damascus after the intense competition in the middle of the decade. Turkey and Qatar were both investing heavily in the Syrian economy, while both the Qatari emir and the Turkish prime minister cultivated strong personal relationships with Asad. The Obama administration explored avenues of cooperation in Iraq,

testing Syria's ability and willingness to clamp down on the Sunni insurgency, while several leading members of Congress met with Asad to discuss relations.

On the eve of the uprising, Syria's entry into the regional order seemed to be very much in play. Within months, however, the same leaders who had been so keen to work with Asad would be leading the international effort to force him from office.

This does not mean that the Syrian uprising was the creation of opportunistic foreign powers, as claimed by Asad and his supporters. Outside powers took advantage of the uprising, supported and magnified its efforts, and drove it towards militarization. But they did not create a very real protest movement driven by precisely the same motivations and aspirations found elsewhere in the region.

Syrians would not have protested without the example of the Arab uprisings. They had suffered political repression, police abuse, and economic stagnation for generations with little organized protest. A decade earlier, a tentative political opening had been easily snuffed out as soon as it seemed to pose a threat to the regime. Little popular mobilization had accompanied the massive pressure on the Asad regime in the years following the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, even as massive protests in nearby Beirut drove occupying Syrian forces from Lebanon after fifteen years. It was the regional example of the Arab uprisings and the Libya intervention, not preexisting conditions, which changed the calculus for many Syrians, who suddenly saw the prospect of success, which had never previously been within the realm of imagination.

THE UPRISING

The initial uprising involved almost unbelievably heroic popular participation in the face of extreme state violence and decades of lessons that protest would bring down certain harsh reprisals. Syrians too watched the unfolding Arab uprisings and dreamed that they could somehow do the same. The early Syrian protestors took unfathomable risks. The early experience of the Syrian protest movement resembles that of many other

untries around the region. Inspired by the example of Tunisia and Egypt d replete with manifold local grievances, small numbers of young, cosmopolitan activists attempted to emulate the nascent protest models.² They tried to organize flash protests in Damascus and upload footage to YouTube, to coordinate via mosques, and to place Syrian activism into the broader regional wave. The protests had little initial success, however, in large part due to the Syrian regime's extreme repression and pervasive security apparatus.

Initially, few internal or external players believed that Asad would be seriously challenged. As the violence and size of the protests mounted, the calculations began to change. Syria began to seem like a target of opportunity for some, and an impending humanitarian catastrophe to others. Asad clearly believed that his regime's resistance credibility would shield his regime from the Arab uprisings.³ While Asad projected confidence, his regime clearly recognized the potential threat.⁴ Hamas's Khaled Meshal turned an overconfident Asad as early as February 2011 that "Syria won't be spared by the Arab Spring."⁵ For all Asad's outward bluster, a regime determined to hold on to power above all else hardly needed to be warned.

Asad's methods did not at first fundamentally differ from those employed by other Arab regimes. Asad adopted a mixed strategy, involving both offers of token political reform and selectively inflicted violence.⁶ He did not have the resources to throw money at discontented citizens as in the Gulf states, but he could and did experiment with Jordanian and Moroccan-style preemptive reforms. His political reforms went considerably further than anything offered by Mubarak or Ben Ali, comparing in their substance and timing to the effective divide and rule gambit of Morocco's King Mohammed VI and Jordan's King Abdullah. In the early stages of the uprising, Asad revised the constitution, released political prisoners, and ended the nearly fifty-year-old state of emergency. On February 27, 2012, Asad revised the Syrian constitution, and in May held new parliamentary elections.

Those political reforms were difficult to take seriously, however, when accompanied by a far more brutal exercise of state violence than in the other countries. Syrian state violence included not only attacks on protestors but

also an expansion of arrests, torture, surveillance, and personal intimidation.⁷ The violence was modulated in line with the lessons of other regional cases. The Egyptian or Tunisian policy of restraint seemed an obvious failure, as did Qaddafi's cavalier use of regular military forces which had invited the intervention. Syrian security forces cracked down hard on any manifestation of protest, infiltrating potential protest sites such as mosques and public squares. The always pervasive surveillance intensified, with suspected activists arrested, beaten, and tortured and potentially subversive gatherings broken up by force. Most other Arab security services were doing the same around this time. Asad's violence was tailored to remain below the international threshold of attention, with deaths in those early days measuring in the tens rather than the thousands. Often, the violence was inflicted by the "shabiha," gangs of plainclothes thugs, who offered plausible deniability for the state.

Protests remained relatively small and scattered compared to other Arab countries for the first two months. This changed in March, at almost exactly the same time as GCC troops rolled into Bahrain, Yemen's protest camps dissolved into armed violence, and NATO jets began bombing Libya. The initial spark was the atrocities committed by a local abusive police chief in Deraa. His treatment of a young child arrested for scrawling anti-Bashar graffiti became an iconic symbol for the uprising to follow. Crowds which gathered to protest were repressed violently. The wanton killing of peaceful protestors had a galvanizing effect. Syrians offer a strikingly consistent narrative about the inspirational power of these early abuses and the indiscriminate nature of the subsequent crackdown.⁸

The regime's violence against mounting protests set in motion a cycle of escalation, which rapidly snowballed to other regions and cities within Syria. Asad's careful calibration began to break down as the protests escalated. The Libyan precedent of international intervention to prevent extreme state violence against protestors clearly affected at least some Syrian opposition calculations.

Online activism and citizen journalism played a crucial role in framing perceptions of this violence. Social media activism took on a very different character than it had in Egypt or Yemen.⁹ With very few journalists on the

ground to provide independent verification, videos captured on mobile phones were uploaded or physically moved out of the country through networks of activists who actively curated their contents to support the rebellion. These activist campaigns played out across heavily trafficked Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter pages. They were tightly integrated with Arab television networks such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, which regularly aired footage either taken from activist social media accounts or directly uploaded by those activists to dedicated sites. Western media relied heavily for information and sources upon activists they came to trust, thus acting as megaphones for one side of a complex war.

Overlapping networks of activists and state sponsors joined this effort. Muslim Brotherhood activists, riding high from the events in Egypt and enjoying considerable support from Qatar, played a major though little recognized role in generating publicity for these protests.¹⁰ They did this through a growing network of online activists, which connected out into al-Jazeera's network in innovative ways. As early as the end of March 2011, the Doha-based Brotherhood figure Yusuf al-Qaradawi was using his multimedia platforms to condemn Asad's repression.¹¹ The Brotherhood, which had never recovered inside of Syria from Hafez al-Asad's brutal 1982 repression of Hama, was stronger in the diaspora than on the ground in Syria. This, ironically, positioned them well to take a leading position in the evolving opposition political institutions based outside the country. With Qatari support, the Brotherhood would take a disproportionate role in the Syrian National Council and the international diplomacy of the crisis—a role which in turn provoked intense competition from Turkey and Saudi Arabia to place their own proxies.

Support for Syria's uprising extended beyond the Muslim Brotherhood, however. The Syrian uprising was embraced by most of the activists of the Arab uprising.¹² On March 25, 2011, the leading Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim tweeted, "The Syrian flag has two stars, one for Syria and the other for Egypt." Tweets such as "these leaders in libya, syria and yemen didn't learn the lesson: if your people's blood has flown your end is near!" by Egyptian businessman @naguibsawiris (April 2011, in English); or "Libya, Yemen, Syria . . . all deserve justice and security together . . . and

all the Muslim lands" by Saudi media figure @ahmadalshugairi (April 2011, in Arabic) were common. In those early days, few Arab uprising activists drew a distinction between Syria's and their own.

Support for the Syrian uprising also came from multiple, interlocking Gulf Islamist networks beyond the Muslim Brotherhood's. Islamist public figures in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait early on began to prominently feature Syria in their sermons, charitable campaigns, and social media accounts. Personalities such as the Kuwaiti Salafi Islamist Nabil al-Awadhy emerged as key nodes in the campaign to raise awareness of the suffering of the Syrian people and to mobilize action in response. Many of these Islamist figures also strongly and publicly supported Islamists in transitional countries such as Egypt. They thus aligned well with the Qatari and Turkish vision for the Arab uprising, but found themselves increasingly at odds with the Saudi and Emirati camp.

Despite all this, regional support for intervention proceeded more slowly than it had in Libya. Early on, the Gulf states and the Arab League remained conspicuously silent about Syria, while some reports even circulated about a potential bailout package for Asad comparable to those offered to Jordan, Morocco, and the less wealthy GCC states.¹³ Turkey and the other Gulf states had many reasons to be cautious about pushing regime change in Syria. There was no obvious immediate consensus on Syria across the Gulf. Businessmen, particularly in Dubai and Qatar, had a wide range of interests in Syria, while others had refrained from investment over political differences. As late as mid-summer 2011, prominent journalists like Khaled Al-Hroub could still demand to know why the Arab regimes had remained silent on Syria while the rest of the world, from the United States and the United Nations to Turkey and Iran, were actively engaged with the crisis.¹⁴

That would not be the case for long. This reticence changed as the violence escalated and the Asad regime lashed out against Gulf states as the instigators of the uprising. A series of gory massacres by regime forces shocked and horrified Syrians and external observers alike as images and videos flooded social media. Soon, support for the Syrian uprising would become a major shared aspiration binding together otherwise wildly competitive

regimes, social movements, and ideological trends. They did not always share the same goals, however. Protecting Syrian civilians from regime repression could, as it had in Libya, easily blur into a push to topple the regime.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain had little difficulty turning against Asad. Riyadh had long sought to break the Syrian alliance with Iran and quickly saw the opportunity to go even further. Bahrain likely also hoped to find a way back in to the Arab order following its own widely criticized sectarian campaign of repression, but also reflected the hotly polarized and vocal views of a Sunni community newly empowered as part of the campaign against the protest movement. In both, the public rhetoric moved much more quickly to a sectarian reading of the crisis, with angry calls to support Syrian Sunnis against the Alawite (read: Shi'ite) Asad regime.

The turn against Asad was more challenging for Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan and the emir of Qatar, both of whom had enjoyed very positive personal relationships with Asad. Both countries had invested considerable wealth and political capital in serving as Syria's broker for rehabilitation with the Western alliance. The uprisings changed all this. For Turkey, the key moment came with the June 2011 Syrian attack on Jisr al-Shughur, near the border. As refugees began to pour over the border, Turkey maintained a relatively open border policy, which allowed the opposition to transport goods and people into the areas they controlled—as well as, over time, weapons and jihadists.

Qatar, giddy with its success in driving international action against Libya and the credit it received for the Arab uprising, saw another opportunity to take the lead. Both leaders initially sought to use their ties to Asad to convince him to accept political reforms. When these efforts failed, the two states became among the most fervent supporters of the rebellion. Qatar took a series of steps to replicate the Libyan model by sponsoring the creation of an opposition political body in exile, heavily covering the Syrian rebel cause on al-Jazeera and lobbying the Arab League and the United Nations. Qatar became one of the first states to suspend diplomatic relations and impose economic sanctions on Syria.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of Syria soon actively promoted the rebellion, with the fiery appearances by the Islamist stalwart Yusuf al-Qaradawi and

combative segments by Syrian-origin talk show host Faisal al-Qassem attracting particular attention. Al-Jazeera would soon itself divide over Syria in ways which had not been seen in any other uprising, reflecting the tension inherent in the turn against the "Resistance camp" with which the station had long sympathized. Over the first year of the uprising, several star on-air personalities abruptly departed. By the summer, the dynamic but controversial managing director, Wadhah al-Khanfar, would himself depart, as the station came under more heavy-handed and direct control by the Qatari government.

Then came Homs, where large crowds had gathered despite intense regime efforts at intimidation. In early July, some four hundred thousand protestors took to the streets against Asad. US Ambassador Robert Ford and several other Western diplomats traveled to Hama to demonstrate support for the protestors, who received him with delirious cheers.¹⁵ Asad complained bitterly about Ford's visit and soon punished the city with a series of military assaults. Protests continued to grow, nonetheless, until Asad launched a massive military operation at the end of July, which killed hundreds of civilians in what at that point was the bloodiest single day in the uprising's history. The UN Security Council would condemn the atrocities, but could not authorize a response in the face of Russian fears that such a resolution would be used like Libya's as a pretext for military intervention.

The Obama administration was by this point under tremendous domestic and international pressure to take a strong stand against Asad. The Gulf states had come to a rough consensus on support for the uprising against Asad, even if they still competed ferociously behind the scenes over control of the emerging opposition. The massacres in Hama following Ford's visit directly challenged American credibility. The size and power of these popular demonstrations, the converging position of the Gulf states, and growing international outrage over regime violence crystallized a growing sense that Asad would be unable to retain his hold on power. The Syrian opposition, the Arab media, and much of the Western media amplified this narrative at every opportunity.

Crucially, however, there was still no consensus in favor of military intervention—not in Washington, not in the region, and not among Syrians.

The crystallizing sense that something must be done to stop the atrocities did not translate into any clear path to doing so. The primary emphasis remained on diplomacy, as Western and regional powers worked to build international support for ratcheting up pressure on Asad and halting the spiraling violence. These efforts came to fruition in mid-August. The Gulf Cooperation Council issued a *démarche* demanding that the Syrian regime immediately put an end to the violent crackdown. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait withdrew their ambassadors.

On August 18, 2011, after coordinating with European and Arab allies, Obama released a statement that “the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Asad is standing in their way... for the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Asad to step aside.” This American position failed to convince Asad to leave, but did establish a policy benchmark which would determine the future course of the conflict. The Gulf states and the Syrian opposition believed that they had secured an American commitment to action to remove Asad, even if the White House had made no such decision.

THE DEBATE OVER INTERVENTION

Obama’s call for Asad to step down accelerated the building expectations for an imminent breakthrough. Few close observers of the Syrian regime had any illusions that it would easily give up, though. Obama’s saying the “magic words” that Asad must go did capture attention and embolden the regime’s opponents, but predictably did not persuade the Syrian President to step down. Those familiar with Asad’s history and the nature of the regime warned that he would likely respond only with ever-escalating violence, and that at some point Syrians would likely be forced to take up arms in self-defense. The prospect of such violence was less inhibiting than it might have been only months earlier, however. NATO had come to the rescue of Libya’s protestors, after all, and that month Qaddafi had been driven from Tripoli. Even if Obama himself tried to discourage any expectation of American intervention, many believed that he would ultimately have no choice. His administration was divided, moreover, with many

officials sympathizing with the interventionist instincts of the policy community. Actors on all sides thus received mixed messages about the possibility of an American intervention.

The push for intervention often masked the reality that there was no Arab consensus on Syria. Even more than with Libya, Syria produced an exceptionally bitter, intense public argument over its place within the broader Arab uprisings. Those steeped for years in the “resistance” narrative were well-primed to view the uprising as a proxy war against the Asad regime. The broad networks of pan-Arabists, leftists, and the broader “Resistance” bloc which had constituted one pole in the previous decade’s divided regional politics had every reason to be suspicious. The role of the Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood in promoting the uprising raised concerns. So did the pro-uprising stance of the United States and the European powers, as well as the vocal support of pro-Israeli voices in Washington. The “resistance” media pounded away on the theme of the uprising’s dependence on external sponsors.

Nor was there even a Syrian consensus. That’s why there was a civil war. Asad retained considerable support among wide sectors of the Syrian citizenry, including not only minority communities but also much of the urban Sunni elites who had benefitted from his rule and feared change. Official media, later supplemented by television stations such as the Lebanon-based al-Akhbar newspaper and al-Mayadeen TV, expertly crafted a narrative of foreign subversion, armed gangs, and exaggerated propaganda about protests and repression. Partisans of the two narratives would clash furiously, as information warfare became a central front of the rapidly evolving conflict.

The international and American demand for Asad’s departure triggered increasingly intense debates across the region and within the Syrian opposition over the desirability and possibility of an external role. Where supporting rebels had seemed risky when Asad showed little sign of being seriously challenged, now support for rebel groups seemed to align with an inevitable post-Asad future. As Azmi Bishara put it for al-Jazeera, “[T]he Syrian regime can not continue as it is. Either it will change, or the Syrian people will change it.”¹⁶

The calculus of violence was tricky. Many supporters of the Syrian uprising recognized that their best hope for success was to persuade the still divided Sunni community, religious and ethnic minorities, and the business community in cities like Aleppo to switch sides. Their theory of victory involved maintaining the moral high ground and convincing the Syrian majority to abandon Asad. This required reassuring Alawis and Christians and Sunnis who had thrived under the regime that their interests, and even their survival, would be protected in a post-Asad Syria. The more that protestors took up arms, the greater the fear which the regime could manufacture among its supporters. The turn to armed insurrection, which its advocates argued would be the best way to pressure the regime, instead played directly into Asad's hands by undermining the narrative of peaceful protest and scaring his constituency back into the fold.

The idea of Western intervention was even more controversial than taking up arms within the ranks of the Syrian opposition. For all the relentless lobbying of Western capitals by the exiled opposition for military action, the idea did not command any sort of consensus even among the ranks of the Syrian opposition. The rejection of intervention followed from well-entrenched Syrian and broader Arab norms. Syria's foreign policy and national identity were built around the concept of resistance and a confrontational approach towards Israel and the United States. Those stances seemed to be broadly popular inside of Syria, and with the majority of Arab public opinion. For the opposition, it represented a real challenge: How could those calling to bring down Asad appeal to an enormously unpopular Western alliance for support without burning all credibility with the Syrian public?

A significant portion of even pro-uprising Syrians remained deeply suspicious of American intentions, feared the consequences of military escalation, and preferred to remain an exclusively Syrian and nonviolent movement. Syrians on the inside working with the Local Coordination Committees tended to be far less open to American-led intervention than the politicians and activists in exile who had staked their claims to leadership on their ability to generate international support. While most Syrians fervently hoped for

any form of protection from regime military assaults, others quickly foresaw the likely ramifications of a full-scale proxy war on their homeland. They tried, futilely, to adhere to nonviolence and nonintervention.

Their skepticism about armed rebellion and international limited intervention was informed by their precarious situation on the ground. They knew full well how badly they were outgunned, and how little they could trust the armed groups beginning to emerge. They knew all too well the atrocities of which the Syrian regime was capable if threatened. Many doubted the real intentions of the external actors egging them on towards armed confrontation. As the Palestinian-Jordanian columnist Oraib al-Rentawi prophetically concluded, "[M]ilitarization can be justified by many things, including the monstrosity of the regime, but it is nothing but a road to destruction which paves the road to destructive external intervention."¹⁷

The Syrian regime's brutal crackdown provoked a sharp, difficult debate about the very concept of "resistance." How could Arab popular forces balance between a popular stance of resistance to Israel and fierce repression of a popular uprising? Did Syria's or Hezbollah's confrontations with Israel give them a free pass to murder their own people with impunity? But, on the other side, would backing the protests simply serve Israel's interests by weakening its primary adversaries? Hamas would ultimately vacate its Damascus offices and break with Iran to avoid being dragged in to the polarizing rhetorical war.¹⁸ Hezbollah, by contrast, allowed itself to be dragged ever more deeply into the fighting. The complexities of this debate, mostly in Arabic, were often lost on a Western discourse framed around a simpler story of a united Syrian people against a reviled dictator.

The rejection of violence came from both moral and strategic concerns, with many activists recognizing that the resort to weapons would immeasurably strengthen regime propaganda, cost foreign sympathy, and frighten away fence-sitting Syrians unsure about the potential costs of revolution. Their fears of the costs of turning to violence were well-grounded in the academic literature, though few Syrians were in the mood to listen to lectures on comparative insurgency.¹⁹ The Crisis Group analysts Peter Harling and Sarah Birke captured the logic by which taking up arms could

harm the uprising extremely well: "By pushing frustrated protesters to take up arms and the international community to offer them support, it is succeeding in disfiguring what it saw as the greatest threat to its rule, namely the grassroots and mostly peaceful protest movement that demanded profound change."²⁰

Syrian National Council leader Burhan Ghalioun continued to insist that the uprising was a "peaceful and civil revolution" with the goal of creating a democratic state.²¹ But the turn to arms seemed increasingly like an inevitability. As early as October 2, 2011, the leading Saudi columnist and confidante of its leadership Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed declared that "the armed revolution in Syria has begun."²² What, as the Syrian intellectual Yasin al-Haj Saleh observed, did the opponents of militarization propose to do about the already existing armed factions fighting Asad?²³ What were Syrians to do when subject to the unending killing and depredations of Asad's military machine?

As 2011 ground on, both violence and intervention became objects of ever more urgent disagreement. As the Washington-based academic Basam Haddad observed in early 2012, "[P]rivately, most Syrian dissidents recognize that such tactics do not serve the 'revolution.' Publicly, they are far more preoccupied with fighting or escaping repression."²⁴ Their private concerns were easily lost amidst the din of the Arab media's mobilization for militarization and the loud campaigns by social media activists. For many Syrians on the ground suffering from ever more extreme regime depredations, the ability to deliver international protection came to be the only indicator which mattered of the SNC's value.

The failure of diplomacy is what finally triggered the Syrian opposition's turn to insurgency. The West and its regional partners continued to focus on securing a United Nations Security Council resolution to put pressure on Asad and to legitimate whatever action might be taken. In November 2011, Qatar's Foreign Minister Hamed bin Jasssem announced Syria's suspension from the Arab League, an important and unusual diplomatic initiative. In January, he sought to parlay Arab League support for intervention into a UN Security Council mandate. He presented the Arab case in a high-stakes session of the Security Council.

The Security Council debate over Syria at the end of January 2012 proved to be a more decisive turning point than it had perhaps appeared. Many in the Obama administration thought such a resolution was a real possibility. But it failed in the face of a joint Russian-Chinese veto. Russia explained its veto primarily in terms of the lessons it had drawn from Libya, where it claimed NATO had wantonly exceeded the terms of the mandate and turned a limited authorization for humanitarian protection into an open-ended license to pursue regime change. Qatar's representatives left deeply frustrated with the United Nations and determined to find some other vehicle for intervention against Asad.

The failure at the United Nations led many Syrians and their regional supporters alike to abandon hope in diplomatic options and turn instead to force. The debate at the Security Council had not stemmed the growing violence on the ground. February 2012 brought an important escalation moment in the civil war's cycle of violence. The devastation of the Bab Amr neighborhood of Homs unfolded in the midst of active Security Council deliberations, in full view of the international media (which was momentarily galvanized by the death of well-known war correspondent Marie Colvin). The massive assault on a major Syrian city with heavy weaponry and massive civilian casualties marked a point of no return in the militarization of the conflict. It exposed both how far Asad's forces would go and the limits of Syria's armed opposition.²⁵ From this point, the debate would shift from whether to take up arms to the best way to do so.

ORGANIZING THE INSURGENCY

As it became clear that the Syrian uprising would not end quickly, developing political and functional institutions became essential. Building such opposition institutions required resources, however, which put the new Syrian organizations in a position of dependence upon the incessant internal rivalries and competing agendas of external powers. Four major organizational developments shaped the next stage of the Syrian crisis: the emergence of Local Coordination Councils and the creation of the

tional Coordination Committee in June, the announcement of the Free Syrian Army on July 29, and the creation of the Syrian National Council August 23. These four aspects of the rebellion often disagreed over strategy and priorities.

By June, as violence escalated and life grew difficult, Syrians began organizing themselves at the local level for security and sustenance into Local Coordination Councils. These LCCs were linked together through loose, informal networks which would, over time, evolve into channels for humanitarian relief and political representation. They became key points of contact for international organizations and the media, providing detailed information at the local level about battles and conditions. They also presented the political views and tactical priorities of Syrians on the ground, challenging the claims to representation by nascent, exile-based political organizations. The LCCs in many ways represented the heart of the uprising, the manifestation of the original impulse towards civil resistance and the creation of a better Syria. They had fundamentally different priorities and needs than did the politicians in exile and were far more sceptical of taking up arms and foreign intervention. They would struggle to retain a voice as the insurgency militarized and the political organizations abroad took the diplomatic lead.

In July, seven Syrian military defectors led by Riyadh al-Asa'ad declared the creation of the Free Syrian Army. While it barely existed on the ground, the FSA would become a central front for the debate over the future of the Syrian revolution. It aspired to provide an organizational framework for the many local armed groups, a central location to receive weapons and training, and a magnet for an anticipated wave of Syrian army defectors. The efforts of the Free Syrian Army were portrayed at this point as a response to regime violence, aimed at protecting the protestors and civilians of what was still fundamentally a peaceful revolution.²⁶ Syrians committed to a nonviolent strategy bitterly opposed the concept of the Free Syrian Army and all it represented. Others Syrians suffering from escalating regime attacks saw the urgent need for an effective military option for protection. These deeply divisive debates over the militarization of the revolution would continue for months.

It took time to figure out how to integrate the Free Syrian Army, however tenuously, with internationally-backed political institutions of the Syrian National Council. The SNC was hopelessly fragmented internally, penetrated by regional power struggles, overly focused on attracting Western military intervention, and disconnected from the realities on the ground. Each of the regional powers working the Syrian arena agreed on the hope of dragging Washington into the fray to topple Asad, but each hoped that the intervention would come on behalf of its own preferred proxies. The Syrian National Council was not only fragmented because of the personalities of its members, or even because of the complexities of the Syrian internal debate; the regional power struggles deeply shaped the fragmentation and thus the impotence of the SNC.

The Free Syrian Army seemed to be a way to overcome these problems, by creating a proxy military force with real weight on the ground which could be a collectively acceptable recipient of international support. The FSA was still something of a myth, with a media presence far outstripping its actual organizational capacity. Its many constituent parts represented a diverse array of local defense forces, ideological trends, and self-interested warlords. It exercised little real command and control, and had little ability to formulate or implement a coherent military strategy. By November, the FSA had attracted attention as a potentially viable vehicle for an externally supported insurgency.²⁷ Money and arms began to flow to the rebels in spring 2012 through the FSA, which had positioned itself as the most viable conduit for receiving such external military support.²⁸

The Syrian National Council, created in Istanbul in late August, was explicitly modeled after the Libyan NTC as a vehicle to receive international support and recognition. The Libyan metaphor was reflected in the suggestion that the SNC could establish itself as an alternative government in a "liberated" part of Syria comparable to Benghazi, which could then receive international recognition. From the start, it was one of the most visible locations of the regional political struggles. Each regional power sought to translate its money, media, and political assets into placing its allies on the Council. The Syrian Muslim Brothers, backed by Qatari money and on home turf thanks to Turkey, emerged with a

sproportionate role in the emergent body. This would soon be contested by the Saudis and others.

The National Coordination Committee, formed in June in Damascus, presented a formidable political challenge to the SNC. Fronted by the Druze-based dissident, Haytham al-Manaa, the NCC brought together most of Syria's major secular and leftist movements along with three Kurdish political parties. Problematically for the external opposition bent on armed struggle and intervention, the NCC favored more gradualist solutions, remaining open to a political settlement and dialogue with Asad and rejecting both violence and intervention.

In December 2011, talks between the SNC and NCC broke down over these core strategic questions, as the latter continued to engage in talks with the Asad regime and refused to support the Free Syrian Army or armed resistance. SNC supporters accused the NCC of being too close to Asad, questioning whether they were really even an opposition, while NCC supporters accused the SNC of serving foreign interests rather than Syrian. Such conflicts over political strategy would be a perennial feature of Syrian opposition politics.

Diplomats repeatedly emerged scarred by their experience dealing with the hopelessly factionalized Syrian opposition. This dysfunction was not simply a product of Syrian political culture or of especially demanding personalities. Its disarray was a key obstacle in preventing its recognition and expanded support.²⁹ The SNC's only real power was its ability to attract and distribute resources from the international community, leaving it wholly dependent. This dependence made it fully a creature of competitive intervention and proxy warfare. What looked like indecision was as often the result of intense Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari pressure on the Council members. Had the "Friends of Syria" been a unified grouping pursuing a collectively shared interest, then the SNC might have evolved into an effective and legitimate body. But instead, it became an arena within which backers could fight their battles.

A Syrian opposition conference in Cairo in December 2011 divided hopelessly on the questions of foreign intervention and militarization. The NCC had launched with the articulation of "three nos: to sectarianism,

violence, and international intervention." Over time, however, the center of gravity in the Council, as in its regional backers, had moved in favor of at least the latter two. On December 28, the NCC put out a statement announcing its agreement with the SNC which included a "rejection of foreign intervention."³⁰ This announcement triggered a revolt against SNC President Burhan Ghalioun, led by those who were advocating relentlessly for just such an intervention. Those internal arguments, along with more venal struggles over power, money, and status, would continue to hobble the SNC.

It was at this point that the failure of the Security Council to reach agreement shifted the emphasis to the militarization of the uprising. Building connections between the political and the armed opposition was one of the highest priorities. On March 1, the SNC announced the formation of a military bureau incorporating the FSA. This new institution had little actual power over the emergent armed groups but signaled an irrevocable shift towards the incorporation of arms into the previously, at least formally, nonviolent struggle. As Burhan Ghalioun explained at a press conference announcing the move, the Syrian uprising may have begun as nonviolent but now had no choice but to "shoulder its responsibilities in light of this new reality."³¹ Qatar backed the faction pushing for militarization.

The move, intensely controversial within the SNC, predictably triggered pushback from Free Syrian Army leaders such as Riad al-Asa'ad, who had no intention of subordinating themselves to the political control of the SNC. It also provoked resistance from the other direction, with critics such as Abd al-Bari Atwan warning that "it is obvious that resolving the Syria crisis with the military option is impossible... the regime's security solution has failed and the opposition's hope for military intervention is not on the table and arming the opposition only makes things more deadly."³²

With the United Nations route blocked and Obama resisting being dragged into the war, Qatar and other interventionist Gulf states sought to energize the Arab League's role. But despite the earlier agreement on suspending Syrian membership, the Arab League proved to be far more divided than the Gulf's interventionist rhetoric would suggest. The Arab

's monitoring mission, which had begun arriving at the invitation of the Syrian government on December 26, 2011, was plagued by internal divisions and an impossible mandate and limped to inevitable failure.

In February 2012, Qatar's Hamed Bin Jasssem became the first Arab leader to publicly call for armed intervention in Syria. But, tellingly, he could not mobilize an Arab consensus in support of such an escalation. Even if all the major players agreed on the need to act against Assad, each was worried almost as much about rival powers taking the credit for doing so.

Regional and Syrian differences continued to be on sharp display in the February 2012 Friends of Syria meeting in Tunis. In his invitation, Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalam expected that neither Arabs nor the West would support a military intervention in Syria: "We don't want an Iraqi scenario... We have to preserve the integrity of Syria."³³ But since military action was not on the US-shaped agenda, Saudi Arabia ostentatiously withdrew, with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal describing arming the opposition as "an excellent idea."³⁴ As host, Tunisia's president, Moncef Marzouki, endorsed the Qatari proposal of "an Arab intervention in the framework of the League, an Arab force to keep peace and security, to accompany diplomatic efforts to convince Bashar to leave."

Nor did the Arab League unite around an intervention. When the Arab League convened in Baghdad in March, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki firmly opposed such intervention. His objections were not simply sectarian or dictated by his dependence on Iran, as his critics complained. Baghdad was replete with lessons for Arabs contemplating American military-led intervention, regardless of their sect or ethnicity. Many others, who remembered well the horrors of Western intervention in Iraq, quietly supported Maliki.

Supporters of the rebellion now focused instead on finding ways to build up the capacity of the Syrian opposition. Libya by this point was already showing the dangerous implications of the weakness of post-transition institutions. Indeed, one of the arguments for military intervention would soon come to be the need to create a safe zone inside Syria where an opposition-led government could establish itself. On April 1, the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul pledged major financial contributions to support the rebels. This

cash went not only to administrative support and humanitarian relief. The core idea was to ensure that all international resources—including military aid—be channeled through these developing institutions.

This was the right way to proceed. It was also doomed, for reasons that Libyans could easily have predicted. The competing Gulf regimes and Turkey had other interests in play, and little incentive to follow the American organizational lead. Significant amounts of Arab money reportedly went as well towards efforts to supply the Free Syrian Army and to entice defections by Syrian officers and officials. There was no way to prevent the Syrian opposition from using international funds to buy weapons, and much to gain in the regional struggle for influence by arming Syrian proxies.

The US reportedly put heavy pressure on the Gulf states to hold off on implementing their plans for a large-scale covert arming of the rebels, but by this point the momentum towards such operations was already well underway. As the UAE-based analyst Mustafa Alani told the *Guardian*, "The decision to arm the rebels has been taken in principle, but it has not yet been implemented."³⁵ It soon would be.

Still, the voices most heard in the West were the backers of armed insurgency and Western intervention among the exiled political groupings. Lobbying Washington to change its stance on Syria came to dominate much of the Syrian political agenda in the coming years, time spent at international conferences and luxury hotels which might otherwise have been spent building alternative political institutions on the ground. By November 2011, these debates had tipped in favor of taking up arms, but those pushing for Western intervention had failed to win support for a no-fly zone or other direct military moves.

In this context of failed diplomacy and regional support for arming an insurgency, the concerns over the militarization of the uprising now seemed obsolete. Washington's debates over intervention came into sharp focus at this point, with a strong interventionist policy community pushing hard for American military involvement despite widespread public opposition to any such actions. A wide range of options for international intervention would be floated publicly: no-fly zones, safe havens, air strikes, arming the rebels, "no-kill zones," and more.³⁶

These debates relied heavily on the Libya precedent, despite the vast differences between the two cases. Syria looked nothing like Libya's physical terrain. It did not feature military convoys moving across open roads in the desert, a long coastline for naval support, few effective air defenses, or an easy east-west territorial divide. Nor was Libya located in the heart of the Levant, situated between multiple regional powers and some of the most militarized and tightly contested airspace in the world. The intervention in Libya had commanded both Arab League and United Nations Security Council consent, neither of which was forthcoming on the far more controversial question of Syria.

None of these proposals offered any real chance of success on their own. As one senior administration official scathingly put it to me, Washington was full of ideas to get the military in to Syria, but not how to get them out. No-fly zones, safe areas, or no-kill zones would need to be enforced, requiring escalation when the regime violated them as happened to such horrifying effect in Bosnia. Few of the proposals took seriously the likelihood that Asad's backers would escalate in response, restoring a hurting stalemate. Obama administration officials clearly understood that the proposals for limited intervention would only put America on a slippery slope towards direct intervention. In a rare moment of candor in June 2013, one vocal proponent of intervention acknowledged that "mission creep" provides the hope of a successful outcome rather than a terrifying threat to a major foreign policy initiative.³⁷ At least this was honest.

MILITARY ESCALATION

The Asad regime responded to this growing military challenge with ever-escalating violence, both by regular forces and through the shadowy plainclothes gangs known as "shabiha."³⁸ On May 25, 2012, regime forces carried out a particularly horrifying mass slaughter in Houla, northeast of Homs. Images of more than a hundred butchered Syrian civilians circulated widely through social media and reached a broad regional and international audience. The Houla massacre inspired a unanimous Security

Council resolution condemning the Asad regime, a scathing report by the UN Human Rights Council, and a steady series of meticulously researched reports by international NGOs detailing the Syrian regime's crimes against humanity.³⁹ These international rebukes had little effect. Nor did the international outrage over the late July siege of Hama or the later slaughter of hundreds more civilians by regime forces in the Damascus suburb of Darayya.

The war of narratives surrounding these massacres was equally intense. International media and analysts horrified by the violence and sympathetic to the uprising consistently failed to appreciate the potency of Syrian regime propaganda, which they found laughable. The Syrian government blamed the deaths on rebel forces or dismissed them as routine skirmishes exaggerated by opposition activists and a biased international media. While such claims sounded ludicrous to Western observers, the narrative resonated with the regime's own core constituencies, terrified of advances by groups portrayed by regime propaganda as violent jihadists. Enthusiasts for armed insurgency failed, at great cost, to appreciate how the arming of the opposition strengthened this insular, internally coherent narrative and consolidated rather than undermined Asad's support.

As conditions deteriorated, large-scale massacres by regime forces became increasingly common and the uprising tilted irreversibly towards armed insurgency. By the spring of 2012, Syria had reached the point of a full-scale civil war fueled by growing external patronage which would be difficult to derail through either negotiations or limited intervention. With each escalation, the strategic situation moved another notch up the ladder to a new, more violent and destructive stalemate.

THE ANNAN PLAN

Asad's scorched earth tactics and mass killings destroyed any opening for peaceful protest, and in the eyes of most Syrians opposed to the regime, left little choice other than taking up arms in self-defense. Syria's strategic importance guaranteed that regional players would get ever more involved, particularly since they paid few real costs of their own. As the Syrian

al-Jazeera personality Faisal al-Qassem noted in May 2012, "Syria is no longer an internal battle which can be resolved by a deal between the regime and the opposition. It is now in the hands of the powers which support each side and resolving the Syria crisis will require an agreement between the rival powers."⁴⁰

That insight was the guiding principle behind UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan's mission. This diplomatic gambit to convene the major powers to find a pathway towards a political transition represented the last serious opportunity to stop Syria's descent into hell. It failed, despite Annan's best efforts, because neither side wanted such a solution. The rebels and their backers wanted to overthrow Asad by force, felt morally outraged by his atrocities, and did not believe that he could be trusted to abide by any diplomatic agreement. Asad and his backers believed they could win, did not believe the fragmented rebels could deliver on a deal, and expected defeat to mean death or war crimes prosecution. By the summer of 2012, Syria's descent into full-scale proxy war was virtually irreversible. Both sides enthusiastically cheered Annan's failure while steering off the cliff.

The predictably disastrous outcome of the Syrian opposition's decision to take up arms remains one of the greatest unresolved and probably unresolvable questions of the Syrian war. I was among the minority of analysts who vocally opposed the militarization of the opposition, because I feared precisely the disaster which would soon unfold. The turn to armed insurgency struck me then, and now, as a fatally flawed choice which should be discouraged rather than supported. The strongest rebuttal from supporters of militarization was not that armed insurgency could work, or that taking up arms was strategically viable or morally imperative. It was that taking up arms was, in fact, no choice at all. A population facing Asad's brutality had no choice but to find some way, any way, to protect itself and to fight back. Many observers desperately wanted to do something, anything, to protect Syrians from the atrocities being inflicted upon them by the regime. For all the horrors which followed that fateful choice, we should never lose sight of the core reality that it was Asad's obstinate brutality which forced Syria into war and invited the carnage to come.

On April 10, 2012, the deadline arrived after long months of diplomacy led by United Nations Special Envoy Kofi Annan.⁴¹ His peace plan called for an immediate cease-fire and negotiations towards a political transition. Failure to seize this opportunity for a negotiated end to the war, he warned, would result in a catastrophe for Syria and for the region. His plan presented the most plausible and realistic possible solution for a country on the brink of uncontrollable civil war. Of course, critics from every side dismissed his efforts as hopeless. The rapid escalation of violence and the already unbelievable scale of death and destruction left few willing to contemplate co-existence with those they blamed for the horrors. The February 2012 devastation of Homs and the revelation of a series of brutal massacres had indelibly scarred those in the opposition who might have once contemplated a negotiated path. The March 2012 series of bombings of regime targets in Damascus punctured the bubble of security for regime supporters, and emboldened advocates of armed insurgency in the opposition ranks.

Both Annan and his critics were right. A negotiated end to the war was indeed the last and only hope for Syria to avoid descent into hell—and it was impossible to achieve, for Annan or anyone else. The regime still believed that it would win, and that concessions would only weaken rather than strengthen its prospects for survival. The inability of Libya's well-armed revolutionaries to win against a much weaker and isolated Qaddafi for nearly six months, even with direct NATO intervention, may have reassured once-nervous officials.⁴² At any rate, regime officials did not believe that its internal and external enemies would be satisfied with compromise when they had so publicly committed themselves to regime change. Insurgents, flush with the first shipments of weapons from external sponsors, dreamed of total victory. With the images of massacred civilians fresh in their memories and renewed on a daily basis, few believed for a moment that the regime could be trusted to adhere to any promises of reconciliation anyway. Everyone was spoiling for a fight and nobody saw the value of compromise. They would have been far better served heeding Annan's council. With Annan's failure, Syria missed its last, best chance for a negotiated alternative to full-scale war.

ARMING AN INSURGENCY

By the late spring of 2012, Syria's uprising had been consumed by the early stages of the grim logic of competitive proxy war. In such situations, every escalation in favor of one side tends to trigger a response from the backers of another—never enough to win, always enough to keep the war going. The political science literature on such wars offered a clear guide on what to expect. The external arming of rebel groups tended to prolong civil wars, making them bloodier and harder to resolve. These problems are typically magnified dramatically when funding to rebel groups comes from multiple, competing powers rather than from a single unified source.⁴³ They were even worse when the other side could also draw on external patrons for support.

That's exactly what happened in Syria. As rebel groups began to take up arms in response to the Asad regime's brutality, they found ample sources of funds and weapons from abroad to support their insurgency. When they began to demonstrate too much success, Asad's backers ramped up their own support to the regime. Financial assistance on each side gave way to the direct provision of weapons. Indirect assistance gave way to direct intervention by Hezbollah and Iran. After the emergence of ISIS, the US and its allies began a major air campaign against the Islamic State and occasionally against other jihadist groups in the fractious rebel alliance. Then Russia introduced its own troops and air power into the campaign on Asad's side. Each move invited a countermove. The international balance of power superseded the local balance of power, ensuring an ongoing and increasingly destructive stalemate. All of this was easily foreseen in early 2012.⁴⁴

Many backers of arming Syria's rebels acknowledged that such support could not bring about a military victory over Asad. They argued instead that it would improve their bargaining position. Asad would only bargain, this logic went, if he felt mortally threatened. This logic, unfortunately, never made any sense. As Stanford political scientist James Fearon quickly saw, it was virtually inconceivable that a balance of power in favor of a negotiated outcome could be constructed.⁴⁵ "Neither side could

completely crush the other," he observed, "due to the fact that this has also become a proxy war in which the international parties will adjust their support to prevent complete military elimination of their clients." But nor could negotiations work. Each time one side's relative power increased, so did its objectives. Nor did either side have any faith that the other would adhere to a deal. When Asad was strong, he saw no need to compromise, but when he was weak he felt too threatened to strike a deal. When rebel groups were strong, they wanted to go all the way to overthrow the hated Asad, but when they were weak they did not dare put down their arms.

The fragmentation of the rebel forces was one of the greatest barriers to either victory or a negotiated settlement. The high level of fragmentation in the Syrian rebellion contributed to its problems.⁴⁶ The Free Syrian Army had always been a useful fiction rather than an effective hierarchical military organization. Hundreds of fighting groups occupied the scene at any given time, grouped in temporary coalitions typically based more on local demands than on ideological concerns. Most of the groups had only a local presence, so that impressive-seeming numbers of troops did not translate well into the ability to project power. The Syrian National Council could not command the allegiance of the hundreds of rebel factions fighting on the ground, which made it difficult for it to negotiate, or to be able to credibly guarantee that it could enforce any agreement reached. And then, of course, the jihadist groups would continue to fight no matter the status of negotiations between Asad and the Western-backed rebels. As the University of Maryland political scientist David Cunningham has observed, "Civil wars last longer, and are more resistant to negotiated agreement, when they contain more actors who can block settlement."⁴⁷

The uncoordinated, large-scale flows of support to the rebels, which began in earnest in early to mid-2012, ensured that this debilitating fragmentation would continue. The primacy of Islamist-minded Gulf networks in the provision of funds inevitably skewed the character of the insurgency to those who shared (or could be enticed to profess) similar views. If growing a beard were the price of opening the tap of foreign support, there were many prepared to stop shaving. That does not mean that they would easily shave off the beards if American money were

ered, though. The longer the fighting continued, the more that fighters internalized the ideas for which they fought and the more the center of gravity shifted to the extremes. Long-running violent insurgencies were no vice for moderates.

As the conflict internationalized, external stakeholders proliferated, each pursuing its own sense of vital interests and cultivating its own proxies. No stable outcome could be reached which did not bring all the players to the table, including not just the Syrian factions, but also Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Meanwhile, the uncoordinated arming of rebel groups meant that every group had an incentive to protect its access to that source of power, and to align itself to the degree required with its patron's ideology or objectives. The transfer of weapons predictably accelerated the destructiveness and intensity of the war, with each phase of the conflict moving up another notch on the escalatory ladder. Syria became a stalemate, but a dynamic stalemate which grew ever more deadly and destructive rather than settling in to relatively stable front lines.⁴⁸

A succession of UN Envoys followed Kofi Annan, including Lakhdar Brahimi and Steffen de Mistura. Each attempted to build an inclusive diplomatic process, secure local cease-fires, and leverage the armed might of the insurgency. They failed to gain much traction, however, because few any of these external actors had any real interest in finding a negotiated solution. They paid few significant costs from supporting their proxies in the war and saw little reason to accept a negotiated agreement which fell short of their objectives. The role of Bashar al-Asad became a vital symbolic sticking point, far beyond his actual significance: Gulf states simply would not accept any plan which included his remaining in power, while Iran and Russia would not accept his departure as a precondition. And US diplomacy spun its wheels for years on end.

Obama was constantly lambasted for failing to arm the Syrian rebels, even as arms poured into those very groups. This has always been misleading. The United States remained publicly cautious about arming the insurgents, but rapidly developed a covert program to arm and support vetted rebel groups. Special forces from Qatar and Saudi Arabia cooperated

closely in training camps for rebels in Jordan and Turkey. Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia each lavished support on their preferred clients, as did non-state Islamist networks and groups of Syrians living abroad. Tens of thousands of rebel fighters reportedly received training in these camps over the years.

Rebel groups actively sought out sources of such support, playing the field looking for the best deal. As in Libya, their choice of proxies was only partly driven by ideology. Availability and convenience played almost as big a role in the scramble for local assets. Both supply and demand for weapons boomed in this period, making it difficult for external backers to exercise any real control over the groups they funded or the weapons they supplied.

There was close to a consensus inside the Beltway for arming the Syrian rebels, despite all the logistical and strategic problems this entailed. Some of the best American Middle East hands pushed for what they called a "managed militarization."⁴⁹ In their view, with a full-scale external proxy intervention well underway, the best Washington could hope for was to join the game in sufficient weight to tip the insurgency in a more moderate direction and retain American influence over its course. This approach had little hope of success, though, in an environment where rebel groups had a bonanza of potential funding sources, and with Gulf funds coming faster and with fewer strings attached. Managed militarization made sense to US officials concerned about losing their role and desperately seeking policy instruments of value in the new Syrian war. But in reality, it would only speed up the destructive path of militarization without buying significant control over the spiraling insurgency. Syrian fighting groups had little interest in being managed, and there were plenty of other managers on offer.

While the largest share of the funds came from state sponsors, large-scale public campaigns to raise funds for Syrian rebel groups also played an important role in the radicalization of the insurgency. Islamists across the Gulf held massive pledge drives and public charitable events. Syrian expatriates also mobilized to organize such support. While most of these campaigns initially focused on humanitarian assistance, over time they

shifted palpably in the direction of support for armed groups. Kuwait became an epicenter for these efforts, particularly as a worried Saudi Arabia began to crack down on fundraising and recruitment within its own borders. Islamist figures hosted iftars, coordinated charity drives, and spoke out frequently about the Syrian tragedy.

Syria soon became the central cause of an increasingly sectarian and extremist Islamist popular movement. The massive flows of aid into the rebel groups were fatally uncoordinated, which systematically and fatally encouraged fragmentation rather than consolidation of the insurgency. What is more, the need to demonstrate efficacy to foreign sponsors put a premium on dramatic military acts and ideological performances. Videos of military acts and rhetoric attuned to the proclivities of potential state and private sector sponsors were uploaded to YouTube in part as advertisements. Where the US looked for evidence of moderation, most of these Gulf sponsors put a higher premium on Islamic authenticity and demonstrable military success.

The principal-agent problem familiar to political scientists was endemic to the Syrian proxy war. The external powers needed local proxies as much or more than the local clients needed their patrons, and their interests were only imperfectly aligned. Qataris, Turks and Saudis were not especially picky about who they armed, as long as they fought well. Where the US, for instance, might want its proxy forces to articulate a democratic platform and refrain from human rights abuses, the forces themselves might have a greater interest in killing regime opponents and consolidating their local power base. Tight supervision might be possible on clearly defined issues, such as the transfer of advanced weaponry to jihadist groups, since that could be closely monitored with a credible threat to cut off rebel groups who broke the agreement. But such control was far less viable with regard to the core identity and interests and local behavior of the fighting groups.

The US was more deeply involved in the training, arming, and coordinating of the insurgency than the American political debate reflects. Its role was never sufficient, though—and probably never could have been. The US tried to exercise maximal control over its agents, particularly

with regard to access to advanced weaponry and their broad strategic orientation, leaving the recipients frustrated and constantly lobbying publicly and privately for more independence and—always—more weapons. Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia gave a much freer hand to their proxies, which won them greater influence on the ground at the cost of having less control over rebel activities or ideologies. American fears that such a loose approach to insurgent proxies would lead to rampaging extremism and uncoordinated violence would prove amply justified in the months and years to come.

This continuous, ongoing negotiation between patrons and clients played out predictably in the media. Every few months, stories would flood the American media featuring the Syrian rebel commander du jour accusing the Obama administration of failing to support their cause. Op-eds pleading the case of Salim Idriss or Zahran Alloush or the newest savior appeared in the American press with dispiriting regularity. These transparent bids in the patron-client bargaining game were typically taken at face value by a credulous policy community keen to find ways to bash the administration or to flash insider credentials, amplified by backers of the rebel commander in question hoping to parlay publicity into material support.

THE DRIVE TOWARDS DAMASCUS

At first, the arming of the opposition appeared to be paying dividends. The FSA seemed to be showing dramatic progress in the late spring and summer of 2012. All the signals seemed to indicate the rapid deterioration of the Asad regime's position. A growing flood of high-level Syrian officials were defecting publicly, and even more were quietly moving their assets out of the country and seeking safe passage. FSA forces were advancing south towards Damascus. In July 2012, a mysterious explosion in Damascus killed a number of top regime security officials. Many observers believed that the Syrian conflict was approaching its climax.

The Saudi and Qatari media filled with triumphalist rhetoric. Al-Sharq al-Awsat editor Tariq al-Homayed crowed that "Iran[,which] had thought

that the Arab Spring was its great victory and that it was a great Islamic Awakening, now sees it only as a conspiracy as its greatest ally is close to the end, and soon Syria and the whole region will be freed of its worst regime.”⁵⁰ His colleague, Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, saw “everyone jockeying as signs of Asad[’s] collapse mount.”⁵¹ The end, claimed Lebanese columnist Hussein al-Haydar, on July 19, is near.⁵² The international media too embraced this expectation of an impending endgame.

But Asad did not fall. The Damascus offensive stalled, the regime reconstituted itself, and Syria fell into an even more violent stalemate. What happened? The regime’s survival was actually not especially surprising, given that it still enjoyed an overwhelming military advantage and the support of both external powers and a significant portion of the Syrian population. The media commentary of the summer might be best understood as a psychological campaign in support of the Free Syrian Army offensive, aimed at convincing Syrian regime supporters that the time had come to defect, and Syrian oppositionists skeptical of the armed insurgency to overcome their reservations and commit. It also aimed at forcing the Obama administration’s hand by convincing a cautious White House that the right side of history had arrived. The Obama administration came under withering attack for failing to understand the realities of what was unfolding in Damascus. Obama was also, of course, right.

As the insurgency settled in for a long war, regional powers fought as much to establish their control of rebel institutions as they did to unseat Asad. Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia schemed to empower their local proxies within every new institution, polluting each effort to unify the opposition with the same toxic dynamics.⁵³ In November 2012, Qatar sponsored the creation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The Coalition was initially fronted by the Syrian moderate Islamist Moaz al-Khatib. As the Coalition became the central political organization for the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia pushed to dilute Qatari control by placing their own clients in leadership positions. Khatib resigned as president in April, and in July was replaced by the Saudi-backed Ahmed Jarba.

The armed opposition was also struggling towards political organization and inclusion within these opposition institutions. In December 2012, a broad array of insurgent factions came together in Antakiya, Turkey to select an official leadership for the Free Syrian Army. The Supreme Military Council, headed by General Salim Idriss, was designed to connect the military and the political wings of the insurgency. All of these efforts were meant to provide a single channel through which external arms and funds might flow, under the effective control of an accountable political leadership. In late May 2013, representatives of the Free Syrian Army would join the Syrian National Coalition for the first time.

Civil society organizations and NGOs worked hard at this time to insert questions of human rights, transitional justice, and post-Asad governance into an agenda dominated by urgent military challenges and bitter political rivalries. With Asad’s regime looking shaky but not facing imminent collapse, some organizations used the time to address the vital question of what would follow his regime. Indeed, some came to believe that Asad falling too soon would be as damaging as his surviving indefinitely. Working groups assembled regionally and globally to tackle prospective questions of transitional justice, the provision of security, the creation of representative institutions, and the preservation of essential state services. These were admirable efforts, but they consistently struggled to gain purchase amid the escalating violence and political bickering.

The Obama administration continued to be cautious and divided in the absence of any good options. Some members of the administration such as CIA Director David Petraeus and (more passively) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, advocated joining the Gulf’s insurgency strategy by covertly arming and training rebels. A significant number of American officials working on Syria, especially in the State Department, agreed Obama himself, along with key White House advisors and many in the Pentagon, had long been wary of the insurgency strategy, which they correctly anticipated would lead not to easy victory but to a long and bloody stalemate. They foresaw that Syria’s allies would increase their support to the regime at each point it faced increased pressure. They also worried intensely about the security vacuum which could follow a sudden regime

collapse, which could lead to reprisal massacres, the disintegration of the country, or the incubation of an Iraqi-style jihadist insurgency. At the same time, Obama maintained a rhetorical posture that Asad must go. This public agreement on objectives meant that even though there were real and important disagreements about the desired endpoint, the intra-alliance (and public political) battles were primarily about means, not ends.

American caution infuriated the Gulf states and Turkey, which had hoped to be able to harness American power in support of their own objectives. They began to publicly advocate going it alone, a rhetorical posture which paradoxically seemed largely meant as an intra-alliance threat aimed at pressuring Obama to get with their program. "Don't wait for America," implored Lebanese columnist Hassan al-Haydar.⁵⁴ Relying on the United Nations had never solved any Arab problem, grumbled another Saudi columnist.⁵⁵ Restraining or at least coordinating these regional covert arms flows to the rebels would come to consume the attention of American diplomats in the coming months. Their efforts would fail.

DEMOC

Syria's plunge into the elsewhere in the regions had produced a ren terminated to complete a elections had gone ahead Islamists. Yemen's careful lah Saleh frustrated many Rabbo al-Mansour al-H kept the process moving ment of a government victory in November 20

Libya, too, remained challenge of state building as the distribution of oi mament of militias. Still election which could b well in the July 7, 2012. Most of the major part