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ANALYSIS

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SYRIA: HOW THE WEST CAN PLAY A WEAK HAND BETTER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent agreement between Russia and the United States to secure Syria's chemical weapons arsenal may remove a pernicious class of weapons from the Syrian battlefield, but will do nothing to end the conflict. With the conflict now locked in a bloody stalemate for the foreseeable future, the West needs to revisit its policy towards Syria. It has always had a weak hand in that conflict, but it can play it better, by focusing in the short term on the consequences of the conflict rather than its causes.

The chemical weapons agreement shows that the regime and its international allies do respond to even limited threats of force, even if such threats will never compel them to totally capitulate. The task for the West now is to build on this deal and forge new agreements providing for humanitarian access and protection, and for a durable ceasefire. This will not end the conflict, nor the Assad regime. But for the moment at least Western policy needs to operate within the realm of the possible, rather than the preferable.

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The agreement between Russia and the United States to secure Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, now enshrined in Security Council Resolution 2118, represents a significant achievement in a conflict that has largely been characterised by diplomatic deadlock and failure. If it is fully implemented it would mean that a particularly pernicious class of weapons would be removed from the conflict, ensuring that they are neither used again by the regime, nor fall into the hands of extremist groups. But the truth is that the vast majority of Syrians have been killed by conventional not chemical weapons. And this narrow agreement will do nothing to end the conflict. What the West – or more specifically the three main Western actors on the Syrian question, the United States, the United Kingdom and France — needs to do, therefore, is to build on this limited achievement to mitigate some of the other more far reaching consequences of the conflict, if not end it altogether.

Acting on its own, the West cannot bring the Syrian conflict to an end. Most of the policy options that the West has had in Syria have been poor ones. But it is also true that the West has played a weak hand badly. Even the agreement on chemical weapons reflects this. It was not the result of some well-thought out plan to use the threat of force to make diplomatic gains. Rather, it reflected an expedient meeting point between Washington's unwillingness to take military action and Moscow's uncertainty about where the US threat of even limited military action might lead.

The agreement is consistent with a Western approach to Syria marked by half-measures, indecision and contradiction. It has called for the President Bashar al-Assad's removal from power, but has not been prepared to mount the decisive military intervention necessary to make its rhetoric a reality.

It has pursued diplomacy, but limited its options by making Assad's removal from power a prerequisite for the start of negotiations. It has gradually and warily armed parts of the opposition, but only to levels that guarantee the conflict will continue rather than end in the opposition's favour. Having few good policy options, the West has largely adopted a reactive approach. In effect, it has been allowing Syria to bleed out. Policy has been left to the mercy of events on the ground.

What has most exposed the hollowness of the West's approach to Syria has been President Assad's vicious resilience. Within six months of the uprising beginning, the United States, the United Kingdom and France had all called for Assad to step down. But in the two and a half years since protests first broke out in Syria, Assad's regime has defied confident predictions of its imminent demise. In recent months it even reversed some opposition gains and achieved a degree of momentum on the battlefield. Even if Assad ultimately reneges on the chemical weapons deal and the United States takes limited military action, it will do little to change the overall trajectory of a conflict that has settled into a bloody stalemate.

The consequences of this stalemate are clear: the continuation of an already enormous humanitarian catastrophe; deepening regional instability; and the growth and empowerment of extremist groups. It is time, therefore, for the West to reassess its approach to Syria. It still has a weak hand in Syria, but it can play that weak hand better. It needs to make some hard choices. In particular, it must decide whether it is more important to remove Assad from power, or end a conflict that is having disastrous moral and strategic consequences.

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As this Analysis will underline, Syrian policy needs to operate within the realm of the possible, rather than the preferable. Having signalled that it is not willing to mount a major military intervention, the West needs to focus its efforts on diplomacy. This will not be easy. The West will need to find diplomatic solutions to the conflict and its consequences without, as far as is possible, rewarding the Syrian leadership for its brutal behaviour and for the responsibility it holds for the death and suffering of millions of Syrians.

The first part of this Analysis examines why the conflict is likely to remain a bloody stalemate – albeit one that favours the regime. The second part argues that the devastating consequences of this stalemate require a shift in Western policy towards diplomacy and de-escalation. The final part of the Analysis argues that the initial objectives of these diplomatic efforts should be improved humanitarian access and a ceasefire.

A bloody and prolonged stalemate

In the early days of the conflict, conventional wisdom held that while the Assad regime might be able to stay in power for a while, it would eventually fall. As external support for the opposition grew and support for the regime diminished, it was felt that the regime's military forces would splinter through desertions and battle casualties and eventually turn on the regime. From mid-to-late 2012, momentum lay with the armed opposition. Large tracts of countryside were given up by the Syrian military, which preferred to concentrate its forces in the main population centres. This strategy enabled the opposition forces to rapidly gain territory and left the impression that the regime was near collapse.

From early 2013, however, the Syrian regime began

clawing back limited but tactically significant ground from the opposition. The strength of the regime has been its unity, not just amongst its Alawite and Christian constituencies, many of whom believe their survival is tied to that of Assad, but also amongst a significant number of middle-class Sunni supporters. In fact, Assad's survival has underlined what was evident in earlier uprisings elsewhere in the region. Whilst popular protest was critical to initiating the downfall of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, these uprisings were only successful once the regime split.

Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition, both inside and outside the country, has been fragmented. Made up of myriad groups, it includes long-time opponents of the regime – most notably the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, defectors, secular political activists and Sunni jihadists (both Syrian and foreign). Torn between irreconcilable views on the future of Syria, the various factions and individuals have been unable to demonstrate an ability to organise themselves, let alone their country. In particular, the inability of the opposition outside the country to form a coherent and united leadership has made it barely relevant to the opposition elements inside the country. The result is that there has been little coordination between the military and political elements of the campaign to unseat Assad.

Having weathered the rebel advances of 2012, a long game has suited Assad. Indeed, after years of fighting, a war-weary population may ultimately opt to live with the regime rather than experience ongoing instability and continued loss of life. Events in Egypt and in Tunisia, where the downfall of long-time regimes has seen both great instability and a backlash against the Islamist governments that came to power, will also play into Assad's hands. It is no

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coincidence that Assad so publicly welcomed the army's recent seizure of power in Egypt.

All of this is reinforced by the fact that the opposition has failed to provide much of a palatable alternative in the areas it controls. The most extreme example of this has been the type of rule maintained in Raqqa, the only provincial capital to fall to the opposition.¹ Al-Qaeda linked Islamist forces grouped as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked and drove out elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from the city. While the local population initially welcomed the stability that the departure of regime forces brought, a number of factors dissipated any early good will, including the imposition of Salafist social norms and the public execution of regime 'sympathisers'. Recently, fighting has erupted between ISIS and the FSA in Azaz, a town on the Turkish border. More of this type of infighting between opposition groups can be expected as they jostle for power and position.

It would be wrong, however, to view the opposition purely in terms of its most extreme elements. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that any successor to the current Syrian regime would be jihadist, or even Islamist. But the Syrian regime has been able to exploit deficiencies in opposition rule even in territories controlled by more moderate forces. As one opposition commander said of his group's inability to penetrate more deeply into Aleppo: 'Our resources are already limited. When we enter and the regime starts bombing and we have no food or supplies to give them (the local population), they turn against us and then we become the enemy.'²

The relative strength and weakness of the regime and the opposition respectively were highlighted by the battle for the key border town of Qusayr. The loss by the rebel forces of Qusayr in June 2013 to the Syrian military, backed by a large contingent of

Hizbullah fighters, was significant. For the first time, the rebels lost an entire population centre to the regime. It signalled that Iran and its ally Hizbullah were fully committed to restoring government control, raising the cost of intervention for any external supporter of the opposition. More practically, it blocked what had been a major supply route into Syria for opposition fighters from Lebanon.

The victory at Qusayr represented a shift in military momentum in favour of the regime. Since then, the regime has focused its attention on expanding its control in the areas around Damascus and targeting opposition-held areas in Homs, seen symbolically as the heart of the revolution. In response, the opposition renewed its efforts in Aleppo and launched attacks in Assad's heartland of Latakia. More recently the fighting has been concentrated on the suburbs near Damascus, as opposition forces seek to place maximum pressure on the regime's heartland at the same time as the regime seeks to cement control over the same area.

But if the current situation seems to favour the regime, it by no means represents total victory. It is unlikely that the regime will be able to fully re-establish control over the entirety of Syria in the medium- to long-term, if ever. It is possible that the main population centres will be in government hands, while some areas in the northeast and the north (and possibly the south) become occupied opposition territory for a prolonged period. Central government control may have been sufficiently weakened, however, that some areas will be under the control of pro-regime militias whose support for the Assad regime will be tenuous and sporadic.

Syria will not exactly be a country divided, but it will be vastly different to the Syrian state under full

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regime control that existed prior to the uprising. The opposition is far from a spent force. Syria's military will find it difficult to completely defeat it. It is likely, therefore, that a significant insurgency will continue. The Islamist hard core will refuse to concede defeat, or accept a negotiated outcome that fails to reflect its religious and ideological objectives. In the absence of some international agreement that appears unlikely at the moment, regional states will continue to provide support, either through government channels or privately, if for no other reason than to continue to impose a price on Syria and on its main backer Iran, for its support of the Assad regime.

Of course, there could still be great, unexposed frailties within the regime; or the opposition may eventually become significantly more cohesive and effective. Nevertheless, at the time of writing it is difficult to imagine what might shift the balance back in the opposition's favour short of a decision by the West to make a decisive military intervention or to significantly ramp up support for the opposition. However, neither seems likely to happen.

Of more immediate risk to the regime is the state of the economy. The damage that the Syrian economy has suffered has been enormous, and the impact has been felt in nearly all sectors. Syria's GDP contracted by over 31.4 per cent in 2012, while its foreign reserves, which have taken years to accumulate, have nearly been exhausted.³ The value of the Syrian currency has collapsed from 47 to 250 pounds to the dollar (and is only at this level because of government intervention). Inflation in 2012 rose by 37 per cent, while unemployment is over 60 per cent.⁴ Before the conflict, agriculture accounted for roughly 20 per cent of Syria's GDP and it was self-sufficient in wheat. Now, however, wheat and barley production has slumped to less than half of pre-war

levels.⁵ The energy sector has been equally heavily hit: oil production has dropped from 380,000 barrels per day pre-war to 20,000 currently.⁶

Nevertheless, the regime has some prospect of providing enough economic benefit to shore up its legitimacy. It has, for example, continued to pay its public sector workers, even those in areas no longer under government control.⁷ It raised the salaries of public sector employees by 40 per cent in mid-2013, although this was largely in response to conflict-driven inflation.⁸ Mostly, however, the regime has been able to get by economically largely through the generosity of its allies. Iran has signed a free trade deal with Syria and deposited some of its own funds in the Syrian Central Bank. In April 2013 Adib Mayale, the governor of the Syrian Central Bank, said that Iran had extended to Syria two lines of credit worth \$4 billion.⁹ And in late July 2013, Iran extended Syria a further \$3.6 billion oil line of credit, offset by future unspecified Iranian investments in Syria.¹⁰

Why the West needs to act

The negative consequences of the Syrian conflict for Syrians, for the wider region, and for Western interests in the region hardly need rehearsing. Nevertheless, it is worth revisiting these consequences briefly, if only to understand the urgent need to address them. The humanitarian consequences of the conflict continuing are the most stark, even if the sheer scale of the Syrian tragedy seems to have overwhelmed the empathy of policymakers and the general public in the West. According to United Nations figure released on 13 June 2013, 92,901 people had been killed in the Syrian conflict between March 2011 and April 2013.¹¹ More recently, one NGO estimated the death toll to have exceeded 110,000.¹² The UN

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estimates that some 6.8 million Syrians require urgent humanitarian assistance, half of whom are children.¹³ The conflict has created 1.8 million refugees, making it the largest humanitarian crisis since Rwanda's 1994 genocide, placing enormous economic and socio-political pressures on neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan.¹⁴ On current trends that figure is expected to reach nearly 3.5 million by the end of 2013.¹⁵

There are claims and counter-claims of ethnic cleansing being conducted by both sides: for example, Sunnis being pushed out of Homs province by regime loyalists, and Christians being evicted from Homs city by Sunni Islamists. The ability of refugees to return to these areas would be difficult without some form of external protection. But even if there is a gradual drift back to the country by refugees it is unlikely to be in numbers large enough to really ease pressure on neighbouring countries. Indeed, to manage a return on a larger scale would require close cooperation between UNHCR, other UN bodies and the Syrian government. There is also a serious question mark about Syria's ability to cope with any large-scale return given the level of infrastructure destruction that has occurred. As the regime's ability to rebuild its domestic legitimacy will rest in part on its ability to improve economic circumstances, it would have a strong incentive to avoid encouraging any mass, unregulated return of refugees to the country before it is ready to accept them.

The refugee crisis is also an excellent example of how the humanitarian consequences of the Syrian conflict impact on core Western interests. The economic strain caused by the presence of over half a million displaced Syrian refugees in Jordan might destabilise a key Western ally in the Middle East. The impact of long-term Palestinian refugee camps

on the political stability and security situation in Lebanon provides a stark lesson regarding the potential long-term challenges that such groups can pose for their hosts. There are already concerns that Syrian refugees are crowding out the unskilled labour market in Jordan and Lebanon through their willingness to undercut local wages out of sheer desperation for work.¹⁶

The impact of the Syrian conflict on extremism in the region is another key concern for Western policymakers. Fears that the Assad regime might ultimately be overthrown by some variant of al-Qaeda are probably exaggerated. These groups still only make up a relatively small proportion of the armed opposition, even if at times they have seemed the most effective part. Their ability to control large swathes of territory and the appeal of their hard-line Islamic views to large sections of the Syrian population is also limited. Of greater concern, however, is the way that the conflict has allowed a variety of extremist movements from the region — but also from beyond the region — to re-tool and re-train. Syria is providing opportunities for extremist movements from as far afield as Chechnya, and also individuals from Western countries (including Australia), to gain military training, combat experience and to build networks with other extremists.¹⁷ As a result, the capabilities of these groups that Western and other counter-intelligence services worked hard — and more or less successfully — to degrade over a decade are being rebuilt or created anew.

Another key concern is the impact of the Syrian conflict on strategic dynamics in the Middle East. In the last decade there has been a steadily intensifying geostrategic competition between multiple regional powers. That competition has been sparked by a number of factors: the relative decline of US

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influence in the Middle East; the rise of new actors such as Turkey and Qatar; and, in particular, concern in the Sunni Arab world, as well as in Israel, about the growing power and influence of Iran. The Syrian conflict did not spark that competition, but it has certainly exacerbated it – particularly its Iranian dimension.

Iran and its key ally Hizbullah have invested heavily in the conflict and have helped the regime survive. It is not clear what this will mean in practice, given that Iranian influence in Syria was already significant before the conflict began. It will probably mean a greater Iranian military and intelligence presence in Syria at the very least. But even the perception of greater Iranian influence is destabilising. In particular, it will deepen the genuine security fears amongst countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia about Iranian advances and promote counter-measures. Some of these responses have already been seen in actions such as Israeli strikes on Iranian-supplied weaponry in Syria. It will also exacerbate suspicions and competition in other parts of the region where Iran is seen as a rival, such as Yemen and Bahrain. It may even increase the regional pressure on the United States from regional allies to take more robust action against Iran, including the possibility of military action against Iranian nuclear facilities.

What the West should do

There is no doubt that Western policymakers have had few good options before them to respond to the Syrian crisis. The most decisive intervention they could make in the conflict is also the one they feel, with good reason, least able to make. Already drained materially by two wars in the region, as well as by the impact the global financial crisis, there is little public support anywhere for another major

military foray into the Middle East. This was underlined by the Western response to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in a Damascus suburb in August. Washington repeatedly delayed a limited punitive strike: first to await a British parliamentary vote, which ended up opposing military action; and then a US Congressional vote, which may well have ended up opposing it as well.

In the absence of good options over the last two and a half years, Western policymakers have, understandably, focused on least-worst ones. But there has been a lack of overall coherence: On the one hand, there have been tentative efforts to arm elements of the opposition, but not to levels that might give it a chance of overthrowing the regime or even changing the dynamics on the battlefield to make the regime more inclined to negotiate. On the other hand it has, somewhat half-heartedly, pursued efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict. The most notable was the Geneva meeting in June 2012 that outlined the broad principles of a political transition, but failed to gain any real traction.

In recent months Russia and the United States have attempted to convene a follow-up Geneva II meeting with little success. This process may yet gain some momentum following the chemical weapons agreement. The prospects for success remain slim, however. Even if they attend a new conference, neither the regime nor the opposition are in such a poor military position that they would be prepared to make serious concessions. The reality is, however, that until both sides are at the point of military exhaustion neither has any interest in engaging in serious negotiations.

What this means, therefore, is that in the immediate term it is better for the West to focus its diplomatic efforts on dealing with some of the worst

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consequences of the conflict. Here the recent agreement on chemical weapons offers some lessons. In particular, Syria and its ally Russia were concerned enough about the prospect of even a very limited military strike to agree to the deal. Even if the regime is not serious about fully implementing the agreement, it still suggests that Assad was worried about where such a strike might ultimately lead. Moscow seemed to share this uncertainty. It appears to understand Washington's extreme reluctance to intervene, but has still done everything to prevent the remotest possibility of a change of heart (for example, by blocking even a humanitarian resolution in the Security Council).

This is not, however, an argument in favour of a military intervention. It is one thing to say that Syria and Russia fear the uncertainties surrounding military action. It is another thing to say that they would capitulate in the face of it. Bashar al-Assad and his regime would not surrender easily, even in the face of military action on a significantly larger scale than that being considered by the United States in recent weeks. As Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qadhafi were before him, Assad would need to be dug out of the ground before he capitulates. Any serious military intervention in Syria would be as bloody and costly as the West fears, to say nothing of the high costs in blood and treasure required by any post-intervention stabilisation effort.

Nevertheless, between the regime's willingness to take some steps to avoid military action and its unwillingness to totally capitulate, there is room for diplomacy. In the same way that the West has used the limited threat of force to reach an agreement on Syria's chemical weapons – however tentative and uncertain that agreement may be – it should now seek to reach further agreements to mitigate some of the other negative consequences of the conflict. And

in the same way that this latest agreement was driven by Russia, there is scope to engage Syria's international backers to put pressure on the regime to agree to these measures. The financial costs of supporting the Syrian regime have been significant for Russia and enormous for Iran, and both probably recognise that their current posture is not sustainable indefinitely.

The election of a purportedly more pragmatic president, Hassan Rouhani, is unlikely to shift Iranian policy on Syria dramatically. Iran will undoubtedly remain firmly committed to doing what it can to ensure Assad's survival. Nevertheless, Iran's commitment has come at a high material cost to Tehran, especially at a time when it is facing crippling sanctions of its own. President Rouhani has already signalled that he wants to improve the atmosphere of Iran's foreign relations, much like the former reformist president Mohammad Khatami did. The West should use Syria as a test of the new president's willingness to engage pragmatically. There may even be scope to agree on informal understandings with respect to Iran's presence and involvement in Syria, including on issues such as weapons transfers.

Humanitarian access and a ceasefire

There are two specific areas that should be the focus of the West's diplomatic effort. The first of these relates to the humanitarian crisis. The crisis has reached a point where it engages both the West's moral and strategic interests. There is a need for international humanitarian agencies to gain greater access to those in desperate circumstances in Syria, as well as to alleviate the pressure caused by refugee outflows outside Syria. These problems are complex and the solutions equally so. But it is clear that gaining greater cooperation from the Syrian regime

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as well as its international allies is critical to responding to both. Russian and Chinese reluctance to engage on humanitarian issues in the Security Council has reflected fears that the United States and its allies would use any Council resolution on the issue as a pretext for coercive regime change, as they claim occurred in the case of Libya (although it is hard to believe that that Russia and China were indeed so naïve in the Libyan case).

The United States and its Western allies should therefore build upon the chemical weapons agreements to forge new understandings on humanitarian protection and access enshrined in another Security Council resolution. This could be reinforced by using the promise of easing some economic sanctions should the regime take specific measures such as giving much greater access to international humanitarian organisations, or encouraging the safe return of refugees to particular areas that could be monitored by international agencies. Obviously, cooperation from the Syrian regime will not completely resolve the humanitarian crisis. Responsibility also lies with the opposition, particularly in those parts of Syria it controls.

More generally, the humanitarian situation cannot be resolved in the absence of an effort to resolve the conflict as a whole. As we have argued in this Analysis, this is unlikely in the short to medium term. A more urgent focus should be to conclude a sustainable ceasefire. Given that the regime has gained some military advantage in recent months, it probably has greater interest in pursuing a ceasefire than in the past. In an interview published on 20 September, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister, Qadri Jamil, said that the Syrian regime would be prepared to offer a ceasefire at the forthcoming Geneva talks.¹⁸ It is not clear whether the call by Jamil, who is from one of two small non-Baath parties in the

government, came at his own initiative or was a trial balloon sent up by the regime.

Certainly a ceasefire would allow the regime to consolidate the ground it has made in recent months. For that reason alone, however, the West should insist on real concessions from the regime in return. These would also be necessary to convince the opposition to support such an initiative. In that regard, a ceasefire needs to be couched in the broader context of measures taken by the Syrian regime to halt its assault on both the violent and non-violent opposition. One key element of any ceasefire should be the release of political prisoners and other steps to protect the legitimate opposition from regime retribution. More effort should also be made by the West to engage with the internal Syrian political opposition movements who have not allied themselves with external patrons and who as a consequence have been virtually sidelined in the political process.

We are under no illusions about the prospects of any of these efforts succeeding. But there is a virtue in trying and in recognising that whilst efforts to end the conflict are probably premature, there are things that can be done now to mitigate some of its consequences in the short term. These efforts should also be seen as the first steps in a process that aims to cajole and push both sides back toward a political rather than a military solution. Opportunities for diplomacy are still not propitious, but they are better than they once were. There is an opportunity for the West to move beyond diplomatic passivity in the interests of resolving what is not just one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, but a crisis that is undermining a range of Western interests in the Middle East as well.

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