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The Changing of the Tide in the Syrian Civil War

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The tide is changing in the Syrian civil war. Bashar al-Assad and his regime are gaining momentum, the opposition is weakening, and some of its major traditional supporters seem to be reconsidering their position. These new trends are important, and influence the options available to those advocating transition to a more democratic and moderate regime in Syria as well as those who are primarily interested in the stability of the country and the region.

The transition to a new phase in the Syrian civil war was marked by the regime's victory in al-Qusayr in June 2013. A massive effort by Iran and its proxy, Hizbollah, secured control of a strategic location and was followed by slow, gradual advances in other areas. The fighting continues and opposition groups have scored achievements, but overall the regime is moving ahead in its effort to obtain control of Syria's central axis from Damascus to Aleppo, with extensions westward towards the Alawite region and the coast and southward in the direction of Daraa. The victory in Qalamun near the Lebanese border was the regime's latest achievement.

The trend that began last June was reinforced by the chemical weapons crisis in August. Ironically, an event that nearly led to a massive US punitive air strike ended with an achievement of sorts for a regime that used chemical weapons against its own population. True, it is about to lose most, if not all, of its chemical arsenal, but it was also given a new lease on life since it became an indispensable partner for the implementation of the American-Russian agreement. Furthermore, its major international supporter, Russia, bolstered its position as a player both in the context of the Syrian crisis and in the larger Middle East. In an ever suspicious Arab world, it is widely believed that what began as a limited understanding on the chemical weapons issue is likely to serve as a prelude to a

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larger agreement on a political-diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis that would be rather favorable to Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

Such anxieties were magnified last month by the signing of the Geneva agreement between Iran and the P5+1, and the revelation that it was preceded by secret American-Iranian negotiations. Iran's rivals in the Gulf suspect that the agreement has led or will lead to an American-Iranian rapprochement that would possibly include an understanding on a political solution in Syria. It is seen by Assad's enemies as a blunting of their own power and the potential reinforcement of the Assad regime. In more concrete terms, a Geneva-II meeting on Syria in January 22, 2014 (or later), with Russia and Iran around the table, is seen as hardly likely to end in Assad's ouster from power. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has expressed support for Iran's participation in such a conference, and Britain's Foreign Minister, William Hague, spoke in the same spirit and has apparently dispatched a British diplomat to Tehran to discuss the issue.

Independent of these developments, over the past few months the problems that plagued the opposition and worried its supporters since the early months of the civil war have been exacerbated: the SNC (Syrian National Council) is weak, divided, and devoid of influence on the ground; the FSA (Free Syrian Army) under General Salim Idris has not been able to become the dominant, let alone all-inclusive military organization it strove to be; jihadi groups, most notably al-Nusra Front and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) seem to be the most effective component of the opposition but their vision, program, and conduct in the areas they control are abhorrent to the Syrians and to the international community. Indeed, the regime has been quite successful recently in depicting itself as a bastion of secularism and potential stability stemming the tide of jihadi terrorism in Syria. Moreover, the opposition's supporters, the "Friends of Syria," have not – and do not – act in harmony. Some of their activities are coordinated, but often they operate at cross purposes. The Muslim Brotherhood is detested by Saudi Arabia but supported by Qatar, and private donors in the Gulf countries support different groups, adding to the confusion. More recently, some European "Friends of Syria" have become so concerned with the prospect that their citizens who are presently jihadi fighters in Syria may come back trained and equipped to stage terrorist acts in their home countries, to the point of being willing to abandon the original commitment to regime change in Syria.

A close look at the course of the Syrian civil war reveals that there is no one opposition, and that the term applies to a large number of local groups who conduct the fighting without reporting to or coordinating with any central authority. The Saudis seem to have drawn their own conclusions from this state of affairs and seem to be the major force behind the establishment of a new "Islamic Front," an umbrella organization composed of several Islamist groups that are neither jihadi nor close to the Muslim Brotherhood. It was apparently this group that raided a base of the Free Syrian Army and took possession

of the arsenal there. They justified the raid with the argument that they in fact preempted a similar action by jihadi groups. In any event, this led the US and Great Britain to announce the suspension of the supply of non-lethal weapons to the FSA. This announcement inflicted major damage on the FSA and on the entire Syrian opposition movement. Less devastating but still damaging to the opposition were statements by former US diplomat Ryan Crocker and former head of the CIA General Michael Hayden, along with former IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Dan Haloutz, all of whom stated or implied clearly that Assad, “the devil we know,” may after all be a better alternative than a jihadi takeover of Syria.

Given these developments, what options are available to the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies who from an early stage supported the opposition and stated that Assad had lost legitimacy and should be removed from power?

As matters stand now, there does not seem to be a military solution, certainly not a desirable one, to the crisis. The opposition, which in 2012 and early 2013 seemed to be able to defeat the regime, now seems unable to achieve this. The regime has momentum on its side but its prospect of reestablishing itself effectively throughout Syria is dim. A political diplomatic solution is the best option but it is doubtful that given his recent momentum, as well as Russian and Iranian support, Assad would be willing to step down. In any event, if the Geneva process is to produce a worthwhile outcome, the opposition’s supporters must obtain leverage that they presently lack.

Perhaps most important, they need either to identify figures who can serve both as political and military leaders, consolidate at least to some extent the opposition’s political and military efforts, and be perceived in Syrian, Arab, and international opinion as the face and leadership of a credible alternative to the regime. If this is not feasible, the Saudi tactic of working effectively with local groups and smaller groupings of local forces should be adopted on a larger scale.

Western government do not control statements by former officials, but policymakers and diplomats currently in office must be careful not to undermine the opposition by actions and statements that imply that it is not a credible alternative to Assad, or that “the devil we know” is a preferable alternative to the jihadis.

Finally, it is important to remember that the major issues on the Middle Eastern agenda are linked, and that action and statements in the Iranian context have repercussions in Syria and vice versa. As recently as last month, Secretary of State John Kerry stated once again that the US “believes that Assad has lost any legitimacy for the governance in Syria and must go.” Diplomatic give and take in Geneva or with Russia and Iran that would indicate that this is no longer US policy would cast a dark shadow on the credibility of

the Secretary and the administration and will have repercussions in other arenas. An administration that seeks at the same time to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, to negotiate a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and to resolve the Syrian issue surely knows that its actions and words in one of these arenas will resonate in the other two.

