

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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### *Chaos in Syria – Danger for the U.S. and Israel*

Over two years ago, Syria was a relatively stable nation and Damascus, its capital (the world's oldest continually inhabited city), was a stable city with a mixture of Christians and Muslims who lived reasonably well together. Since 1973, Syria and Israel had agreed to tolerate one another and the result was a stable border along the Golan Heights. Much of this stability was due to the brutal rule of the Assad family, an Alawite clan family that has ruled Syria since 1970. [The Alawite clan comprises 12% of Syria's 22 million citizens.] Hafez Assad led the 1970 coup and his son, Bashar Assad, has ruled since 2000. Early in his rule, there was some evidence that Bashar Assad was a bit more moderate, willing to tolerate the presence of more foreign companies (e.g., Coca Cola) and even permit a degree of social networking freedom in the Internet cafes that dotted Damascus. There were even discussions between Syria and Israel, facilitated by Turkey, about the possibility of a peace treaty in which Israel would give back the Golan Heights in return for a peace treaty. Nonetheless, Syria under Assad aligned itself diplomatically with Iran and its lackey terrorist offshoot, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. But that Syria no longer exists.

The uprising, which began as a part of the broader so-called Arab Spring, has deteriorated into a full-fledged civil war. The rebels, an amorphous group of Islamic radicals (more about this later), are slowly wearing down the Assad regime. It is difficult to see the Assad regime surviving this civil war. The rebels (under the Free Syrian Army) control major parts of the north and east parts of Syria. The Assad regime controls Damascus, although its control is now being challenged. The regime also seeks to maintain control of the territory along the north-south axis of Syria from Damascus through Homs and Hama through the port city of Latakia—the basic region where the Alawites are the dominant sect. There are no serious negotiations occurring between Assad and the rebels. Assad enjoys the full support of Russia (through money and weapons), while the rebels enjoy the financial and weapons support of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Persian Gulf states. The United States has been unwilling to do anything significant for the rebels, all the while calling for Assad to step down. The European Union has taken a similar stand. So, at present, the civil war goes on, destroying what was once one of the most beautiful and stable nations of the Middle East. The United States is hinting at increasing its support of the rebels, but is very cautious to make any major commitment to them. Christians (10% of the population) are fleeing Syria in droves and Islamic jihadists are flooding into Syria. However, once this civil war ends, it is difficult to believe that the Alawite Shiites will remain in power. Instead, the Sunni Islamic jihadists are more than likely the future leaders of Syria. [Sunnis comprise 74% of the population.] It is absurd to believe that Saudi Arabia and the other Islamic Sunni powers are interested in forming a secular, multisectarian democracy in Syria. Syria is a mess and it is difficult therefore to be

hopeful about greater stability for the Middle East. It is a perilous future for both Israel and for the United States. Several additional thoughts:

- First, what do we know about the Islamic rebels seeking to overthrow the Assad Alawite clan that has ruled Syria since 1970? According to columnist Tom Friedman, the Syrian rebels fall into three groups: Those democrats who want to be free to be citizens in a nation where everyone has the same rights; those who want to be free to be more Islamic; and those who want to be free to be more sectarian (i.e., Sunnis as opposed to the Shiite Alawites who currently rule Syria). These groups do not get along and it is virtually impossible to envision a multi-party coalition emerging from this civil war. Will Christians be guaranteed a role in this new regime? Can they even be assured that they will be protected and worship openly as Christians? An affirmative answer to these questions is doubtful. As Friedman argues, “The lesson of Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya is that the sooner you re-establish security, the more people are ready to think and act like citizens rather than sects or tribes. After Assad falls, who will mediate between the communities and militias inside Syria to bring order? Do we really believe that a post-Assad Syria, which doesn’t seem to have a Nelson Mandela, will be able on its own to build a multisectional government to rule the whole country without a well-armed, boots-on-the-ground international force, blessed by the UN or Arab League, to act as a referee?” The geopolitical power centers of the Middle East, the true undercurrents, are not the established states with definable boundaries and established rulers, but the people, the tribes and the clans. Whether you focus on Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria, clans and tribes define the primary loyalties and power centers. That is why the United States has had such difficulties in both Iraq and Afghanistan—and it is also why it is wise for the US to not get deeply involved in the intricacies of Syria. We cannot impose a solution militarily. The last decade has certainly shown that in Iraq and Afghanistan. Syria is no different.
- Second, what then are the options for Syria? Whatever occurs, the US will have limited influence. The Islamic rebels consist of four major groups: (1) Jabhat al-Souriya al-Islamiya, drawn from four main tribal groups in different parts of Syria. These Saudi-backed groups are not hard-core Islamists, according to columnist David Ignatius, but are more militant than the political coalition currently claiming the Syrian seat in the Arab League. (2) The Salafist Muslims, a hard core group that is far more extreme than the first one. (A smaller but similar group called Ahfad al-Rasoul is funded by Qatar.) (3) The most dangerous group is the Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq. This is the group of greatest concern to the United States and Israel. The longer this civil war continues, the greater their power and influence. (4) The free Syrian Army is probably the largest with 60,000 fighters commanded by General Salim Idriss. General Idriss is the key person attempting to consolidate these various rebel forces, with often limited success. Friedman suggests that three possible scenarios could emerge from this brutal Syrian civil war: (1) A western nation, or a coalition of nations, could invade Syria and impose order and a new regime. This has not worked well in Iraq or in Afghanistan. It is doubtful it would succeed in Syria. (2) We can contain the

conflict by supporting and strengthening Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Israel, while we wait as the civil war grinds on. Once everyone is exhausted, then try to forge a power-sharing deal. (3) Simply permit the war to run its course, with the likelihood that it will spread to other nations next to Syria, with the possibility of Syria splitting into regions governed by the various tribal factions. Obviously, neither of these possibilities is ideal or even preferred. It is an absolute mess, seemingly impossible to solve. Please pray for an end to this barbarous civil war and that a just and lasting peace will result—for only that result is in the interest of Israel and the United States.

See *The Economist* (23 February 2013), pp. 25-26; David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (3 April 2013); and Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* (27 March 2103).