

Searching for Solutions in Syria

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The worsening conflict in Syria and the prospect of foreign military intervention outside the mandate of the United Nations poses an immediate risk to civilian safety. The consequences of pursuing regime change in Damascus invite a broader sectarian conflict that would forever reshape the Middle East; this article analyzes the ongoing perpetuation of violence and attempts to offer non-abrasive solutions to the crisis in Syria.

For sixteen months, the people of Syria have undergone economic hardship, tremendous human suffering and the unparalleled horrors of war. As the Syrian opposition officially abandons the ceasefire and calls for foreign intervention and the imposition of a no-fly zone [1], US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has announced a new transition plan that would topple the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, signaling the increasing possibility of intervention outside the mandate of the United Nations [2].

Following clashes between militant rebel groups and government forces that claimed the lives of 80 Syrian troops [3], rebels in Aleppo have reportedly taken 11 hostages and vowed to release them only when a new state is established [4]. While Bashar al-Assad attributes the perpetuation of Syria's crisis to outside forces [5], Iran has expressed its readiness to mount an armed resistance against foreign military forces in Syria [6]. Regardless of who perpetrated the recent killings in Qubayr and Houla, the profoundly disturbing images of lifeless children begs the question, has the Syrian crisis reached a point of incorrigibility?



Western media has largely relied on unconfirmed opposition accounts crediting the Shabiha, pro-government Alawite militias with carrying out massacres across Syria as a result of the Assad government "brainwashing the militia into believing the Sunni majority was their

enemy," [as reported by The Telegraph](#) [7]. Germany's [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung has recently reported](#) that anti-Assad Sunni militants carried out the massacre in Houla, targeting pro-government Alawi and Shia minorities, "Those killed were almost exclusively from families belonging to Houla's Alawi and Shia minorities. Over 90% of Houla's population is Sunni. Several dozen members of a family were slaughtered, which had converted from Sunni to Shia Islam. Members of the Shomaliya, an Alawi family, were also killed, as was the family of a Sunni member of the Syrian parliament who is regarded as a collaborator. Immediately following the massacre, the perpetrators are supposed to have filmed their victims and then presented them as Sunni victims in videos posted on the internet" [8].

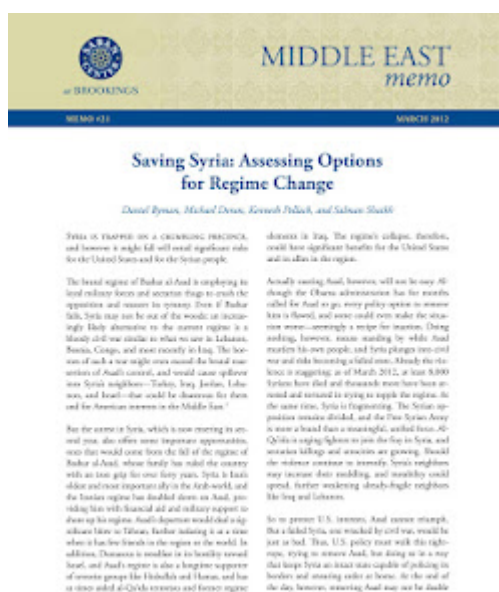
Human Rights Watch has also released a report entitled "[Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses](#)," documenting the outstanding cases of violence exercised by the Syrian opposition, which has been accused of kidnapping, detaining, torturing and executing of members of the Syrian military and civilian government supporters [9]. *HRW* reports that attacks by opposition groups are conducted largely on sectarian grounds, motivated by anti-Shia and anti-Alawite sentiments, citing abuses committed by militant Salafist groups and members of the opposition Free Syrian Army. Although UN observers admit they are unable to determine the perpetrators of the recent massacre in Qubayr with no firm evidence to inculcate the Syrian government, UN chief Ban Ki-moon has declared that the Assad government has lost its legitimacy [10], channeling calls by President Barak Obama, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Prime Minister David Cameron for Assad to step down [11].

Reports of massacres have been framed to fit a pre-determined conclusion, in line with the foreign policy objectives of Western capitals by implicating the Assad regime with orchestrating violence in order to build popular support for aggressively toppling the Syrian government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has recently accused external forces of inciting violence by providing arms and material assistance to militant opposition forces, stating, "They want the international community to be filled with indignation and start a full-blown intervention in Syria" [12]. Following the killings in Qubayr, US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner called on the world to exert "maximum financial pressure" on Assad's government through strong sanctions that "can help hasten the day the Assad regime relinquishes power," while assuring that the US would support the use of force against Syria as authorized under Chapter 7 of the United Nations charter [13].

Although Hillary Clinton has openly acknowledged that members of Al-Qaeda and other groups on the State Department's terror list are fighting alongside opposition rebels supported by the United States [14], countries belonging to both NATO and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have provided extensive financial and material support to the militant opposition. Former FBI translator turned whistleblower Sibel Edmonds has reported that NATO/American-affiliated troops have conducted operations on Jordanian soil near Syrian border in the village of Albaej [15], as US troops reportedly train members of the Free Syrian Army along with Jordanian forces in order to prepare them for an international military drill in the country [16]. Syrian officials report the presence of intelligence operatives from Mossad and the CIA, as well as employees of private military contractors such as Blackwater in Syria; security forces have reportedly detained French, Turkish, Gulf, Iraqi, and Lebanese gunmen operating inside Syria [17].

The *Washington Post* reports in their article, "[Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors' money, U.S. coordination,](#)" that Persian Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar with coordination from the United States have spent millions arming and funding militant opposition groups battling the Assad government [18]. The United States has admittedly spent \$6 million training opposition journalists and activists between 2006 and 2010, while funneling approximately \$6.3 million to the Movement for Justice and Development, a London-based dissident organization that broadcasts anti-government news into Syria [19]. As a further indication of foreign elements at work in Syria, members of the Syrian opposition have also adopted tactics seen by Al Qaeda in Iraq. *Reuters* reports in their article, "[Outgunned Syria rebels make shift to bombs,](#)" that rebels have adopted suicide bombing, booby-trapped car bombs and roadside explosions; Joseph Holliday of the US-based *Institute for the Study of War* adds "There's no question that a lot of Syrians fought with al Qaeda elements in Iraq [against the United States] and it's likely that many rebels today learned bombing skills fighting there" [20].

While the editorial policy of *The New York Times* permits the publication of pieces such as the ostentatiously titled "[Assad, the Butcher,](#)" which incongruously accuses the foreign ministries of Russia and China of living in a "fantasy world" before calling on those nations to receive "comprehensive punishments" for being complicit in "more than 12,000 Syrian deaths," the Western and Gulf capitals' strategy of arming militant opposition forces and extremist groups has worked to foment atrocities and further enflame regional sectarian tension, invalidating any attempt to abide by Kofi Annan's Peace Plan [21]. Publications released by *The Brookings Institution*, a US think-tank noted for its influence on American foreign policy, provides further insight into the nature of Washington's objectives in Syria. *Brookings'* March 2012 Middle East Memo titled "[Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change,](#)" is a testament to the underlying politicization of the "Responsibility to Protect" in Syria, as atrocities are orchestrated as a pretext to protect civilians, to warrant toppling the Syrian government and furthering Washington's geopolitical objectives in the region.



Brookings' Memo meticulously theorizes ways to

overthrow the Assad government, including the use of crippling economic sanctions to further incite unrest and the leveraging of human rights abuses to aggressively intervene in Syria, “Working with its Arab, regional, and Western partners, Washington can push for a more effective humanitarian response and pave the way for more aggressive intervention options to topple Asad” [22]. Due to budget restraints and a public wary of fighting wars overseas, Washington’s strategy is to lead from behind by prompting other countries to lead the charge militarily, “Israel could posture forces on or near the Golan Heights and, in so doing, might divert regime forces from suppressing the opposition. This posture may conjure fears in the Asad regime of a multi-front war, particularly if Turkey is willing to do the same on its border and if the Syrian opposition is being fed a steady diet of arms and training” [23].

While Hilary Clinton and others pay lip service to supporting the ceasefire proposed by the Annan Plan, *Brookings’* advisers suggest Washington “pin down the Asad regime and bleed it, keeping a regional adversary weak, while avoiding the costs of direct intervention” [24]. The US continues pressuring neighboring countries like Jordan and Turkey to provide support for the militant Syrian opposition, “These allies would have to provide secure bases for the opposition on Syria’s borders, protected by their own armed forces. Their militaries could do much of the arming and training, in conjunction with the United States. Area intelligence services, perhaps including Israel’s, could also work behind the scenes to undermine Asad’s regime and bolster the opposition” [25]. *Brookings’* Memo highlights Washington’s commitment to overthrowing the Syrian government using the most cost-effect means possible, “the hope is that the United States could fight a ‘clean’ war from 10,000 feet and leave the dirty work on the ground to the Free Syrian Army, perhaps even obviating a massive commitment to Iraq-style nation-building” [26].

The toppling of the Assad government would offer the United States and its allies in Tel Aviv and Riyadh substantial strategic advantages, as the underlying object of supporting insurgent activity against Damascus is to undermine Iranian influence in the Arab world. Syria under Bashar al-Assad is the fundamental channel that links Hezbollah with Iran, serving as a transit point for conducting training operations and distributing material assistance to the Palestinian resistance. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has theorized that the toppling of Assad would “be a major blow to the radical axis [Syria, Iran, Hezbollah] and a major blow to Iran. It’s the only kind of outpost of Iranian influence in the Arab world and it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza” [27]. Although Syria’s opposition in power after the downfall of Assad would be a compliant entity to the foreign powers supporting it, the SNC would likely be unable to conjure the political leverage needed to enforce order, and heinous violations of human rights would no doubt occur under it; if Salafist elements were able to usurp authority, Syria’s Alawite, Druze and Christian populations would likely be subject to sectarian violence and persecution.

Israel can potentially reap significant gains from regime change in Syria by working to reduce Iran’s influence in the region and by increasing its commercial exploits in Syria’s Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which supplies one-third of Israel’s water supply [28] and holds an estimated \$24 billion in oil and gas reserves [29]. Over time, resistance movements in Lebanon and occupied Palestinian territories may be unable to defend their territory without outside support, allowing the Netanyahu government to more effectively

pursue its aspirations to create a “Greater Israel”. Saudi Arabia is motivated by the prospect of becoming a dominant regional power and the ideological aspirations of quelling the expansion of Shia identity through neutralizing the governments of Tehran and Damascus, as adherents to Sunni Islam recognize Alawites as part of the Shia sect. Turkey is also determined to increase its influence in the region and possibly expand its territory by annexing northern regions of Syria under appropriate circumstances.

While foreign military intervention would inevitably continue to produce civilian casualties and collateral damage, it is important to recognize that the Syrian people have already experienced the spoils of war at this stage in the conflict. The unspeakable nature of the killings in Syria inevitably brings one to contemplate how diplomacy can be successfully utilized given the current state of affairs. The immediate cessation of violence in Syria through diplomatic and non-abrasive means should be the ultimate objective of those individuals charged with enforcing the Annan Plan, even if it means drastically increasing the presence and financial expenditure of a neutral United Nations peacekeeping mission. For all its shortcomings and adherence to aggressive policies of the United States, Israel, and others, the United Nations is the only institution currently established to undertake such a mission in Syria.

Certain steps can be taken by the international community to ease tensions at the administrative and grassroots levels, namely by encouraging direct talks with between Bashar al-Assad and representatives of all internal opposition organizations, including members of the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Council, the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Coordination Committee, a coalition of left-leaning political parties staunchly opposed to foreign intervention [30]. Although both the opposition and the Syrian government have exercised inappropriate and excessive force indiscriminately throughout the conflict, the government of Bashar al-Assad is the legitimate legal authority in Syria. The Assad government has issued reforms allowing for multi-party competition, the establishment of an independent judiciary, a two-term limit on the presidency and political pluralism through inaugurating a new constitution passed in a referendum held in February 2012. If a ceasefire can be upheld through a power-sharing agreement between representatives of various opposition groups and the current government in Syria, the international community should rightfully encourage such a transition.

Furthermore, representatives of the Syrian government and its allies should have a place at future “Friends of Syria” meetings and any international mediation conference to work towards a balanced solution to the crisis. The United Nations or any other legitimate neutral institution must investigate the nation states and institutions responsible for illegally exporting arms into Syria and issue substantial fines and sanctions to those responsible parties. Neutral institutions must secure Syria’s borders and thoroughly inspect all incoming and outgoing persons and cargo; in addition, an arms embargo must be established and respected by all sides with a focus on subduing illegal smuggling. Both sides must be encouraged to use the maximum amount of restraint, no matter how severe the provocation. In the case of successful dialogue between the Assad government and representatives of the opposition, the creation of UN-administered “arms-free zones” can be established in population centers if opposition leaders can be persuaded to call for the gradual disarmament of rebel forces.

Given the degree of brutality exerted by those responsible for the atrocities in Houla and elsewhere, it is to be expected that certain individuals would not respect such a ceasefire; the motivation for their brutal actions may be sectarian, ideological, or financial. Neutral external individuals and institutions could encourage inter-faith dialogues between regional spiritual leaders, and perhaps influential clerics can be persuaded to issue fatwas or the equivalent against the further perpetuation of violence in an attempt to cool sectarian tensions. If the Syrian government and members of the opposition can come to a conducive transitional agreement where all parties have a degree of influence, joint security coalitions can be formed comprised of UN personnel, Syrian soldiers and former rebels to ensure that the ceasefire is exercised. Those who act outside the ceasefire using illegally procured arms and explosives could be individually prosecuted or dealt with by force if they pose an immediate security threat.

Outside forces must be held accountable for engaging in activities that have brought the Syrian crisis to this dismal stage, namely by paying substantial penalties that can be used to temporarily resettle Syrian refugees and fund efforts to secure Syria's borders. All efforts must be made to transition the Syrian people into a climate of normality, including the removal of economic sanctions. At this crucial stage, the Syrian government should exercise strict curfews to ensure the safety of civilians, making it more difficult for terrorist groups to operate. Even if an agreement can be reached between Bashar al-Assad and representatives of Syria's various opposition groups, terrorists groups would likely continue to provoke violence for whatever their purpose. Until both the Syrian government and the opposition can unite under the common goal of providing security to the people of Syria, no viable political transitions can be agreed upon.

The government of Bashar al-Assad must continue to make tangible reforms that legitimize dissent and promote expression, and the Free Syrian Army must agree to gradually disarm and come to a political compromise. The implications of both foreign military intervention and the administrative usurpation of sectarian fanatics hold unacceptable consequences for the Syrian people and the entire region. Even if internal actors agree upon a solution, it will take years for the people of Syria to recover from this conflict and begin to forgive each other. If the majority of the Syrian people desire a change in leadership, the world must respect their aspirations, however such a decision can only be reached once the domestic security situation has transitioned to appropriate levels by both sides respecting the ceasefire. Those individuals who value stability founded on the pillars of peace, compromise and conflict aversion must make their voices heard and stand with the Syrian people to help steer them out of these dark times, and eventually, help them heal.

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Notes

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[2] [US post-Assad Syria plan: Intervention in the cards?](#) Russia Today, June 7, 2012

- [3] [Syria rebels 'kill 80 soldiers' in weekend clashes](#), BBC, June 4, 2012
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- [5] [Assad says Syria faces "real war" waged from outside](#), Reuters, June 3, 2012
- [6] [Iran: Syrian intervention 'will be defeated'](#), Russia Today, June 9, 2012
- [7] [The Shabiha: Inside Assad's death squads](#), The Telegraph, June 2, 2012
- [8] [Abermals Massaker in Syrien](#), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 7, 2012
- [9] [Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses](#), Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2012
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- [19] [U.S. admits funding Syrian opposition](#), CBC News, April 18, 2011

- [20] [Outgunned Syria rebels make shift to bombs](#), Reuters, April 30, 2012
- [21] [Assad, the Butcher](#), The New York Times, June 9, 2012
- [22] [Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change](#), Page 4, The Brookings Institution, March 2012
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- [25] Ibid, Page 7, Brookings Institution, March 2012
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- [27] [AMANPOUR. Latest full-length edition: Ehud Barak](#), CNN, April 20, 2012
- [28] [Shouting in the hills](#), Al-Ahram, June 2008
- [29] [Netanyahu Approves Oil Drilling In Golan Heights](#), AP, October 25, 1996
- [30] [Meet Syria's Opposition](#), Foreign Policy, November 2, 2011

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