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iNSS Institute for National Security Studies

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סוריה: ממדינה למערכת היברידית – משמעויות לישראל

עורכים: כרמית ולנסי, אודי דקל וענת קורץ

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Introduction

After approximately six years of the civil war in Syria that continues to rage, Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, may have succeeded in stabilizing his rule to some extent. While the end of the war may appear in the horizon, the features of the future Syria, however, are still unclear. The peaceful protest against the autocratic president's rule, which began on March 15, 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, quickly evolved into a bloody struggle involving numerous actors and a severe humanitarian crisis that has impacted the entire Middle East, swept up a mixed multitude of local factions and militias, and resulted in the involvement of regional forces and two superpowers.

Since the war's outbreak, the Syria that we knew has been transformed beyond recognition. The numerous parties with an interest in preserving the Syrian state framework—despite that these interests are sometimes contradictory—increase the chances that the state's framework will be preserved, at least on a formal level and in international discourse. In practice, however, the probability of a central regime asserting sweeping authority over the entire territory of the Syria appears to be diminishing, whereas the probability of the evolution of a complex ruling system with many actors is on the rise.

The ongoing war that exacted a steep human toll resulting in the crumbling of the state and military system in Syria will undoubtedly constitute the main strategic element shaping the future political order in the country. Prominent evidence of this assessment is the emergence of regions and enclaves throughout Syria that are controlled by different elements with opposing interests that have accumulated power and influence during the war. A peace treaty or settlement will reflect a frozen snapshot of a specific state of internal relations and the support provided by external forces. It will

not, however, ensure calm, and local flare-ups can be expected to continue for many years.

The involvement of many international, regional, and local actors in the Syrian turmoil has created an "inflation of power." This dynamic is another cause of instability, as it requires that the settlement process be conducted by agreement, or at least coordination, among the many different parties involved. Additionally, on the day after the war, local forces in Syria will have difficulty ending their dependence on their regional and international patrons. It therefore appears likely that a complex political system will evolve in Syria, combining weak central rule and strong local centers of power with the significant involvement of regional and international external forces.

Guiding Principles of the Analysis and the Working Method

This memorandum is based on the following two research questions: Can Syria rebuild itself as a nation state, and if not, what settlement is likely to take form in Syria in the coming years, and what will be its possible implications for Israel? From the answers to these questions, even if they are incomplete and dependent upon the answers to other related questions, it will be necessary to formulate principles for Israel's policy regarding Syria and the entire arena along Israel's northeastern border.

The research method was "back casting analysis," which enables the outlining of scenarios and examining their likelihood and ramifications. This method is well suited for analyzing complex situations involving numerous parties of interest that hinder the achievement of an agreed upon, shared goal. The analysis allows elaboration on the many different actors and interests and the principles motivating them, including the conditions required for realizing the scenarios under discussion.

The first stage of research involved the identification of two kinds of influential strategic factors (variables): the major parties involved in the war in Syria and in the attempt to shape the Syrian state's future character (local, regional, and international), their agendas, and the major interests motivating them; and the characteristics of the security-military, economic, and humanitarian situation in Syria. During the second stage of analysis, different potential scenarios were formulated for Syria's possible future.

Initially, a range of possible scenarios, or "ideal types," is proposed, including some that reflect the reality of a united Syria and others resulting from the assumption of a disintegrated Syria. Some of the scenarios are

temporary transitional situations, whereas others constitute a more stable end game situation. In the first scenario, Syria ultimately remains a single state under Alawite rule. The second scenario envisions Syria remaining a single state but under Sunni rule. In the third scenario, Syria remains unified within a federative structure. The fourth scenario envisions Syria disbanding into autonomous units. And in the fifth scenario, the war continues.

However, the ongoing monitoring of the developments in Syria, in conjunction with the long-term strategic analysis of trends and possible turning points, have led to the conclusion that there is more than one uniform scenario; that is to say, there is more than one "pure" scenario that could potentially materialize. It is reasonable to assume that a future settlement in Syria will be integrative and characterized by the simultaneous existence of elements and features from a number of scenarios.

For example, the entity referred to as "Syria" is liable to be officially subordinate to a central Alawite rule (primarily in its discourse with the outside world and the international community, but also in internal discourse). In practice, however, this regime will only enjoy de facto control over the Syrian coastal plain and Syria's territorial-political backbone along the Aleppo-Damascus road, and perhaps also over enclaves in the south. The country's other regions will constitute relatively autonomous regions belonging to a kind of federation in which they will be subjected to some degree of Alawite rule, but they will have autonomy to manage their own political affairs. Thus, northeastern Syria will be administered by a Kurdish entity; northern Syria and parts of the south will be administered as part of local Sunni frameworks; and the region bordering Lebanon will belong to a Shiite entity that supports the central regime. In addition to these regions, southern and eastern Syria will contain enclaves of Salafi-Jihadist elements that will refuse to subordinate themselves to the authority of the central regime, even if only on a formal level. These enclaves will be characterized by a low governability, chaos, and a degree of continued low-intensity hostilities.

This study proposes using the term "hybrid political order" to more accurately describe the current political state in Syria, and especially that of the future. The concept of "hybrid political order" refers to a state of mixed-governance implemented by more than one actor or agent, which may include actors from local, national, and international levels. These elements may be political, religious, or organizational institutions, NGOs, and, of course, also official governments.

This memorandum presents the conclusions of a study and a process of joint thinking conducted at the Institute for National Security Studies within the framework of a research program entitled "Syria: Developments, Trends, and Implications" led by Udi Dekel (program head) and Carmit Valensi (program director), with the participation of Gallia Lindenstrauss, Anat Kurz, Assaf Orion, Eran Yashiv, Ofir Winter, Omer Einav, Zvi Magen, Vera Michlin-Shapir, Alon Rieger, Benedetta Berti, Stephen Cohen, Aviad Mandelbaum, Kim Noach, Ofek Riemer, and Ronny Gazit. This program, which was launched in January 2016, encompasses research projects and teams, as well as an electronic database, and has also organized simulations, workshops, and concentrated study days. The project has been graciously funded by the Lapidus Foundation.

Finally, it is important to note that the present study focuses on an attempt to construct future scenarios for Syria and is not intended to provide a current overview of the arena. Therefore, it does not contain a chronological account of all the developments and events that have taken place in the Syrian context, which, in any event, remain in a constant process of frequent and dynamic change during this tempestuous period.

The Strategic Factors Shaping Possible Scenarios

Despite the difficulty of predicting how the war in Syria will end, the perspective of approximately six years of fighting enables presentation of the leading trends, description of the major interests of the involved parties, and identification of the main developments in this complex environment, although the possibility of changes in direction must also be taken into account.

Both a mapping of the major factions involved in the fighting in Syria and of those that will play a role in shaping the country's future settlement as well as an examination of the internal dynamics among these actors point to five factors that could significantly influence the possible directions of the developments in Syria and the crystallization of the possible scenarios there.

The first factor is developments in the battlefield between the Assad regime and the rebels. Since August 2017, Assad's forces have been operating with greater momentum and have accomplished more. If this trend continues, a narrative of the victory of the regime and the defeat of the rebels may take root within the Syrian public; even if this does not result in calm and stability, such a popular narrative would likely put an end to the high-intensity fighting and replace it with a model of continuous low-intensity warfare along the lines of the ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Alternatively, if the rebels succeed in preserving their strongholds in northern Syria and in establishing for themselves an access route to the Turkish border, the outcome would likely be the continuation of high-intensity fighting by the rebels should the regime continue to try to force them to surrender.

The second factor of influence over developments in Syria is the scope and nature of Russia's involvement in the country. This factor has emerged as a major military and political influence on events in the region

since the fall of 2015 with the onset of the Russian military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime. Through the establishment of fighter plane squadrons and advanced air defense systems, Russia controls the skies over Syria; with its naval forces, Russia controls the Syrian maritime arena with the intention of maintaining a Russian naval presence there for an extended period; and by means of the pro-Assad coalition established with Iran, which provides most of the fighting forces on the ground, Russia controls major sites in Syria and ensures the survival of the Assad regime.

The third factor of influence is the extent of Iran's involvement in shaping Syria. The level of unity within the pro-Assad coalition, which is based on the cooperation between Russia and Iran, is also a significant influential force. The greater the legitimacy enjoyed by Iran for its continued involvement in Syria, the more Iran's rivals—namely, the Sunni countries of the Middle East and Israel—will be motivated to take action to reduce and even neutralize this intervention. Moreover, Iranian involvement, let alone dominance, would cause Sunni Jihadist forces to continue their struggle and their fighting against the Assad regime and may obligate Israel to intervene in the events in Syria.

The fourth factor of influence is the fate of the Islamic State (IS) and the campaign of the US-led international coalition to defeat it. The impact of this factor of influence will be determined by four major elements: the duration of the fighting to totally defeat and disarm IS; the identity of the factions that will fill the subsequent vacuum and seize control of the territory formerly held by IS; the identity of the groups that will absorb IS fighters and volunteers after IS is eliminated (which, presumably, will consist of Salafi-Jihadist groups); and the future of the notion of the Islamic Caliphate.

The fifth factor of influence is the willingness and ability of the different rebel groups to cooperate with one another and perhaps even unite. As of August 2017, the rebel groups not only failed to establish a coalition in an attempt to stop their Shiite enemies, who are currently experiencing strategic momentum, but they also diminished their own strength by fighting one another. The splits and internal conflicts within the ranks of the Sunni opposition to the Assad regime are permanent shortcomings that have a detrimental impact on the anti-regime efforts being waged from within Syria and abroad, which, it can be safely assumed, will influence the future reality of Syria.

The five factors of influence are strongly affected by regional dynamics, which result first and foremost from the tension between the Saudi-led Sunni camp and the Iranian-led Shiite camp. These two regional powers aspire to achieve as much influence as possible in Syria; however, like the disunity among the Sunni organizations currently fighting in Syria, the Sunni powers also lack unity. One example is the lack of coordination between Riyadh and Ankara over Syria, as these two countries do not share mutual interests there. Whereas Saudi Arabia's major aim is to stop Iran and its Shiite allies, for Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it is far more urgent to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria. Erdoğan views this goal with such importance that he is willing to risk widening the rift with the United States and NATO, which regard the Kurds as allies against IS.

As noted above, one of the strategic factors influencing the possible scenarios in Syria is the fate of the Islamic State, which, to a large extent, will be determined by the shift in US policy that has taken place since President Trump took office. The US administration subsequently declared a change in its model of fighting against IS[1] and hurried to implement its new model, representing a move from the tactic of attrition—which pushed IS forces from one position to another in Iraq and Syria—to that of elimination. The United States does not intend to allow foreign fighters who joined the ranks of IS to survive the battle and return to their homes or to liberated regions.

At the same time, the United States has also demonstrated resolve in opposing the Assad regime because of its use of chemical weapons, as well as Iran and its proxies, which attempted to seize major border crossings between Iraq and Syria. Despite these resolute actions against Assad and the Iranians, in July 2017 Trump ordered to stop the provision of weapons to the rebels, signaling that he accepts Russian-Iranian dominance in Syria in practice. In view of this volatility in the Trump administration's policy, it is difficult to point to a clearly defined American strategy in the Syrian region, including its political and military coordination with Russia.

The Scenarios

Due to the difficulty of forecasting complex political situations as a result of the large number of parties involved; the depth and the level of the tensions, emotions, and conflicting interests; and the even greater difficulty of predicting how the war in Syria will end, the possibilities for the future of the war-torn country are presented below in a number of basic scenarios, with various likelihood of being realized.

Alawite Rule

Russia and Iran have sought to preserve the Alawite regime, with or without President al-Assad. This would allow them to maintain influence over what goes on in Syria. Although such a scenario is inconsistent with long-term American interests, it can be assumed that the United States—for the sake of achieving short-term stability—will not try to prevent the continuation of Alawite rule, provided that Assad does not remain in power at the end of the transitional period during which an agreed upon ruling structure will be determined.

On the other hand, persistent and severe opposition to the continuation of Assad's repressive rule can be expected within the internal Syrian arena, particularly in view of his responsibility for the murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians during the war. It is hard to imagine that the rebels will agree to disarmament and that practical agreements will be brokered and implemented to prevent large-scale vendettas and the settling of accounts. Saudi Arabia, and perhaps also Turkey, are not likely to accept the Assad regime remaining in power, which would mean Alawite-Shiite dominance in Syria under Iranian patronage.

Sunni Rule

Sunni majority rule in Syria is a vision that is remote from the reality that emerged in the country during the civil war. For such a scenario to be realized, the different rebel factions would need to set aside their divisions and rivalries and unite into a critical mass capable of toppling the Alawite regime. Even if this were to happen, internal Sunni tensions regarding the future character of Syria can be expected: Will the state be secular-democratic? Will it be subject to political-Islamist rule, with the Muslim Brotherhood playing a prominent role? Or will it be subject to Salafi-Islamist rule and operate in accordance with a strict interpretation of Sharia law?

Russia could come to terms with such a scenario on the condition that the new regime grant it indefinitely control of strategic strongholds by the Mediterranean Sea, such as a maritime port (Tartous) and an airport (Khmeimim), and allow it to retain its influence in the country. Iran, on the other hand, would oppose such a scenario, continue to use its proxies to undermine the situation from within, and not allow the Sunni regime to establish itself. The United States could support a Sunni government headed by the Muslim Brotherhood, provided it promises to refrain from oppressing minorities and from establishing ties with al-Qaeda and IS. Turkey would prefer such a scenario over the continuation of chaos or continued Alawite rule in Syria, on the condition it would prevent the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria on the border with Turkey.

The local population, it appears, would come to terms with the crystallization of a Sunni state identity, but at the same time, it is expected that it would demand a regime model based on greater civilian involvement in the political process and non-oppressive governance. In such a scenario, a fundamental question would relate to the extent of the balance between the aspiration for secularism and for administering the country in the spirit of Islam.

The Kurds would most likely accept a Sunni regime on the condition that they are granted autonomy, which most likely would be given to them due to lack of choice and recognition of their strength. The establishment of a secular regime with a democratic approach would allow the international community to mobilize for rehabilitating the country's economy and infrastructure and rebuilding its institutions. Without such assistance, Syria will continue to wallow in its problems without any concrete solution.

A Federative/Decentralization Structure

The idea of establishing a federation in Syria reflects the recognition that different groups control different regions of the country and that no group possesses the military capacity to defeat all the other groups. The organizing idea underlying the federative plan is the need to preserve the territorial/political framework known as Syria but at the same time to also give expression to local centers of power. This solution is liable to appear on the agenda if it receives a significant push by Russia and the United States. They could propose it if they reach the conclusion that there is no other way to bring an end to the war. Toward 2018, Russia has been working on promoting a federative or decentralization plan in order to ensure its strongholds on the Syrian coast. To this end, Russians must leave a loyal Alawite region in the Syrian coastal region. It can also be assumed that the United States might be willing to promote such an option in order not to bring about an end to the vision of a united Syria if the administration concludes that this scenario has the greatest possibility of preventing the continuation of violence. Additionally, such a plan would help the United States meet its obligations toward the Kurds and provide them with expanded autonomy in the Kurdish province of northern Syria in order to prevent the infiltration of ISIS elements back to areas liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is composed mainly of Kurdish forces

It can be assumed that the sub-state regions—provinces or cantons, each with its own dominant force—would be established first and that the nature of their relationship with the central government would be determined at a later stage. In any case, the prevalent assessment is that the federation, if established, would be weak as a result of the intense hostility that exists between Syria's religious and sectoral groups after the many years of civil war and bloodshed.
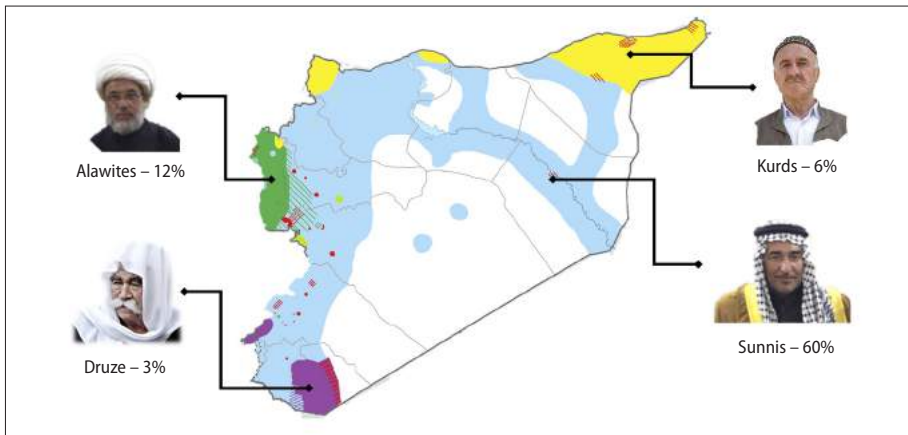
Figure 1: The Sectoral Map, 2010

Autonomous Units

The inability to agree on a ceasefire and to move toward a political process for shaping the state may result in an interim situation, which could last for an extended period of time, and would reflect the current reality in Syria: the country's division in practice into a number of distinct religious and ethnic units. In such a situation, the borders of each of these separate units would be determined by the military power relations between the units (these power relations could also ultimately serve as a major force shaping the structure of the federative order). Russia can be expected to play a central role in implementing the scenario of a Syria divided into autonomous regions due to its relations with the Alawite regime. Russia can also be expected to seek to preserve Alawite rule in the coastal region and to try to extend its rule along the entirety of Syria's territorial backbone—the Aleppo-Damascus road. In addition, in such a situation, Russia assumingly will seek to reach bilateral understandings with each of the autonomous units.

Still, it is important to emphasize that the attempt to divide up Syria according to a sectoral formula will be complex if not impossible. For example, the Assad regime accelerated the process of urbanization and dispersion of Alawites throughout the country's different urban centers, integrating them among Muslims throughout the country, which was secular in character. The result was sectarian heterogeneity in the major towns and districts. It is also reasonable to assume that Saudi Arabia and Iran—which would prefer that Syria remain united in order to maintain their influence in the country

and the existing regional order—will not cooperate with an initiative to dismantle the country, especially if the preconditions they perceive to be essential for them are not met. Saudi Arabia will not abandon the goal of achieving a special status for the Sunni population and significantly reducing the Alawite-controlled regions, which are subject to Iranian influence. Iran, on the other hand, will not abandon its goals of preserving the Assad regime, defending the Shiites and Alawites, and achieving territorial continuity under its control, from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea, via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The Syrian population may also still include factions who aspire to a settlement based on a united Syria and seek to avoid separating populations that were part of the Syrian state entity for approximately a hundred years. Therefore, forces within Syria that oppose the division of the country can be expected to not accept it, even if it is defined as "temporary."

Still, the exhaustion of those involved, the deadlock, the even balance of power, and the ongoing fighting without any decisive military outcome have practically led to a division that reflects the reality on the ground and the minimum goals of the local forces. The achievement of stability will require accommodating enclaves under the control of Salafi-Jihadist elements alongside an effort to remove Islamist groups from the major cities. The Kurds can be expected to work toward achieving territorial continuity in northern Syria along the border with Turkey.

The division of Syria—in theory or in practice—will require the international community to formulate and implement a differential approach to the country's rehabilitation and reconstruction. The implementation of a reconciliation process is also expected to present significant difficulties, out of fear for revenge campaigns due to ethnic, religious, and sectarian rivalries

The Continuation of Hostilities

With the passage of time, the probability increases of continued hostilities of varying intensity, and the chances of establishing a new united Syria decreases. The great likelihood that the hostilities will continue results, in part, from the fact that most external parties have an interest to continue their intervention in Syria and shape its future. It must be remembered that although many military campaigns are currently underway in Syria, the major one is between Sunni Islam—under Saudi leadership—and Shiite Islam, under Iranian leadership. Similar campaigns between Sunni and Shiite Islam are also being waged in Yemen and Iraq. For Saudi Arabia, Iran, the

Gulf Emirates, and possibly also Russia and Europe, it is more convenient that this major war is being fought outside their borders. In addition, it may also be advantageous for the regional powers involved in the war (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey) that Syria continues to bleed, as this situation serves as a constant warning sign to their own citizens about what would happen if they attempt to rebel.

If the scenario of continued hostilities does indeed become realized, it is expected that Russia and Iran will continue actively providing aid to the Assad regime, whereas Saudi Arabia and the Sunni countries will maintain their support of the Sunni rebel groups, including Salafi-Jihadist forces. The United States, it can be assumed, will continue to focus on eliminating IS but at the same time will attempt to contain Iranian efforts to exploit the weakness of the Sunnis for their own benefit. However, to do so, the United States will need to define clear political goals and expand its military involvement.

Thus far, uniform scenarios for Syria in its entirety have been presented: war throughout Syria as a whole; a federative solution that includes the entire country, and so forth. By acknowledging the reality in Syria, however, the likelihood of any one uniform scenario being realized is extremely low. It is much more reasonable to assume that several scenarios will take place in Syria simultaneously, with each region witnessing the emergence of a certain scenario to a varying extent.

Syria the Day After: A Hybrid Political Order

A Reality of Multiple Scenarios

Indeed, the formal discourse articulated in various forums regarding the future settlement in Syria consistently refers to a united state subject to the rule of a single central government. However, when examining this discourse in depth, it can be discerned that, alongside the formal commitment to the unity of Syria, other options exist, according to which the state will ultimately contain sub-entities that exist in parallel in a federative structure of some kind.

However, an assessment guiding this study is that any future settlement in Syria will be heterogeneous—meaning, it will encompass components of all three fundamental scenarios described above. In extension of this principle, Syria could formally be subject to central Alawite rule while the regime itself would control only the coastal strip and the country's territorial backbone—the main road from Aleppo to Homs to Damascus—and perhaps also several enclaves in the south.

The assessment that Syria will ultimately witness the simultaneous emergence of several different scenarios stems from an analysis of the reality on the ground, the features of which are known: it is a complex conflict involving many different internal and external parties linked by alliances that are not always permanent and change from time to time. This approach to the subject is an innovative one. Other related studies reflect the tendency to relate to post-civil-war-Syria as a homogenous entity and therefore assume a single scenario for the country's future.

According to such a composite scenario, the remaining areas would operate as a federation under the authority of the central regime to some degree, but would have the autonomy to administer their own political

affairs. Northeastern Syria would be a Kurdish entity; the Idlib region on the Syrian-Turkish border would be a Sunni region; and both would exist alongside enclaves of Jihadist elements. These areas would be characterized by poor governability, a high level of chaos, and varying levels of continued fighting. It is therefore proposed here to adopt the term "hybrid political order" to refer to Syria's structure and politics in the coming years.[2]

The term "hybrid" enables imagining and exploring a variety of decentralized configurations combining a state structure along with sub-state areas, reflecting different social logics that do not function in isolation from one another and have relations with one another. Such relations may be consensual in nature, but they may also be other conflictual and confrontational kinds of relations.

Some of the possible solutions may well be the result of developments on the ground and the power relations between the fighting forces. For example, proposals have been advanced—primarily by the external forces involved in Syria—to establish "safe zones," "de-confliction zones," "de-escalation zones," "no-fly zones," and "special security zones." The distinction between a state and informal institutions has been blurred as these entities borrow features from one another. For example, informal institutions adopt state discourse and practices and states are influenced by informal non-state agendas. Some argue that hybrid models often result in higher levels of stability, effectiveness, and legitimacy because of the more suitable solutions they offer to the different social groups.

The internal and international formal settlement discourse addresses the idea of a united Syria subject to central rule. In our opinion, Syria will indeed contain formal state components, but it will be able to enforce them only on some of the territory of the state—the area that is sometimes referred to as "little Syria," which contains Damascus; the country's central territorial backbone between Damascus and Aleppo; the area bordering Lebanon; the coastal strip; and perhaps also important enclaves in eastern and southern Syria.

The area along the Aleppo-Damascus region will be controlled by Alawite rule and will be surrounded by autonomous sub-states, in accordance with the dispersion of the different forces and with the sectoral division in the area. This will require international recognition of the existence of Syria on an official level as well as of sub-entities based on sectarian and religious affiliation, subject to the balance of military forces on the ground. It will also require, *inter alia*, the ripening of conditions for the establishment of

a Kurdish autonomy—which could have ties to the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq—and an attempt to establish a separate functioning Sunni entity that is not controlled by Salafi-Jihadist forces such as IS. The conditions (the strategic factors shaping the scenario) that will need to emerge for this complex scenario to be realized in Syria in the coming years are described below.

Features of Unity

The Alawite Backbone

Assessing whether the scenario of unity will ultimately be realized in Syria requires answering several key questions: Is the rule of Bashar al-Assad a necessary condition for the Alawites and others who are loyal to the regime in any future settlement? Is Assad's remaining in power a necessary condition for his allies? By early 2018, no other accepted figure has been found to succeed him. Therefore, different talks addressing the end of the civil war in Syria have raised the idea of Assad remaining in power, at least during a transitional period during which an agreed upon regime structure occurs. Nonetheless, throughout the civil war, Russia has been less determined than Iran in promoting the continuation of Assad's rule. The Russians have been willing to discuss the possibility of replacing Assad with a different Alawite representation, which has led to disagreement between the two countries.[3]

The scenario of an Alawite-controlled Syria is a feasible outcome that Iran and Russia could impose on the other parties, based on the power they hold and on the regime's relative strength vis-à-vis other forces. This means that Assad would remain in power (even if negotiations are conducted on a formal level). The more stable the period of transition, the more likely the positions of some of the regional and international parties, including that of the US administration, will soften toward Assad's remaining in power.

In order for the Assad regime not only to reassert its control over large parts of the country but also to acquire international recognition of its control, Russia will need to continue advocating the position that the Assad regime is the only prospect of preventing the continuation of chaos and of defeating, once and for all, the Salafi-Jihadist elements, including IS (at least its territorial dimension). If Russia is satisfied with its achievements in the Syrian arena and with its strengthened status in the international realm and in the Middle East in particular, it assumingly will continue to provide Assad with extensive assistance in seizing control of the other parts of the country.

The fact that the United States recognizes Russian dominance in Syria (as became apparent in 2017) increases the probability that Assad will indeed manage to solidify his rule in the areas he controls and may also succeed in expanding them. It can also be assumed that the US administration will not insist on replacing Assad and will not oppose the establishment of a transitional government under his leadership. If Russia and the United States reach an agreement regarding a transitional government, the result could be an extended interim phase that would delay efforts to shape a different political situation in Syria for many years.

Iran will continue to provide Assad with military and economic support and to work toward establishing a land corridor extending from Tehran, via Baghdad, to Damascus and Beirut, and to maintain Hezbollah's special status, including the presence of forces and military infrastructure. It is evident that Russian policy, which revolves around an agreement for the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria, accommodates Iran's intentions of solidifying its presence in Syria over time. Iran's strategy is long term, and whereas it can be assumed that most Russian forces will be evacuated from the country after the regime reestablishes itself, Iran will maintain a presence in Syria, on its own and/or through its proxies. Turkey, which views the possibility of a Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria as a significant threat, will agree to the continuation of Alawite rule only if the regime reconquers the regions under Kurdish control and does not turn these regions into a card to be used against them, or allows the establishment there of a security zone in which Turkey will be ensured long-standing dominance. Saudi Arabia will not cease its financial support of rebel groups operating against the Assad regime and hence remain one of the few parties that still support them. At the same time, Saudi Arabia will likely reduce its support due to other financial obligations and its recognition that this support will not bear fruit.

From a military perspective, following the significant achievement of conquering Aleppo, the regime aspires to move toward the conquest of the other rebel strongholds, especially those with economic importance. Turkey will continue to support the Free Syrian Army in order to turn it into the major Sunni force in the country and to support its hold over the Sunni enclaves in Syria. The other Sunni groups will probably not succeed in unifying themselves, and the reduced Saudi support is expected to result in a decline in their power. To the consternation of Turkey, the Kurds, which constituted the major force assisting the United States in its fight against

IS, will continue to rely on American support; otherwise, because of the lack of choice, they should turn to cooperating with the Assad forces and the central regime. The greater the Turkish pressure on the Kurds, the more likely they will cooperate with the central Alawite regime, on the condition that they are granted autonomy in northeastern Syria.

The immense destruction in Syria caused by the years of war, as well as the war's fatal blow to the country's economy, will require wide-scale rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts.[4] The International Monetary Fund estimated that bringing Syria's GDP back up to its pre-war level, which was unimpressive in any event, will require at least twenty years of rehabilitation.[5]

See Table 1 and Figure 2 below for insight into Syria's economic situation since the outbreak of the civil war. What is more, deep scars of enmity will remain between the Sunni majority and the regime as a result of the ongoing, high-casualty war, with the regime and its supporters having used all means at their disposal to defeat their adversaries. Still, several factors will reduce the potential for resistance to rehabilitation efforts on the part of the Sunni population, including the fear of continuing bloodshed, the exhaustion from the war, and the fact that the Sunnis will most likely acquire a degree of autonomy.

Table 1: Changes in the Gross Domestic Product, 2011–2015 in comparison to 2010

Period	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Change in GDP (%)	3	-3	-25	-36	-15	-5
Change in Oil as Share of GDP (%)		-10	-49	-79	-44	0
Change in Non-Oil Share of GDP (%)		-2	-22	-32	-14	-5
Govt. Revenue (% of GDP)	24	19	12	7	6	5
Oil Related Revenue (% of GDP)	8	5	3	1	1	1
Non-Oil Tax Revenue (% of GDP)	10	9	5	4	3	3
Non-Oil Non-Tax Revenue (% of GDP)	7	5	3	2	2	2
Govt. Expenditures (% of GDP)	27	29	27	23	23	17
Public Consumption (% of GDP)	18	21	23	21	21	15
Public Investment (% of GDP)	9	7	4	3	3	2
Budget Deficit (% of GDP)	-3	-9	-16	-16	-17	-12

Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), *Syria: Confronting Fragmentation! Impact of Syrian Crisis Report*, Quarterly based report 2015 (New York, UNDP, February 2016), p. 17, http://www.sy.undp.org/content/syria/en/home/library/poverty/confronting-fragmentation.html.
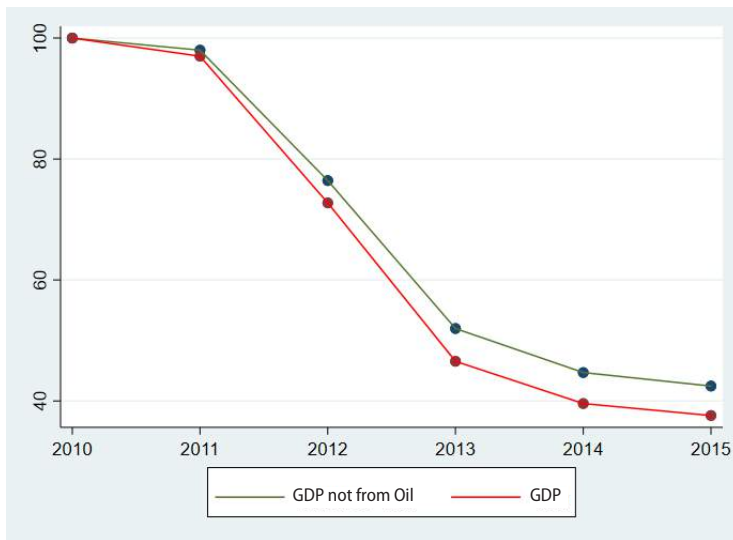
Figure 2: Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 2010-2015, as a percentage of GDP, 2010
**Source:** Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), *Syria: Confronting Fragmentation! Impact of Syrian Crisis Report*, Quarterly based report 2015 (New York, UNDP, February 2016), p. 17, http://www.sy.undp.org/content/syria/en/home/library/poverty/confronting-fragmentation.html.

As for the refugee crisis, approximately five million Syrians fled the country during the civil war,[6] and, at least in the long term, most are not expected to return. Although the absence of such a large number of inhabitants of course reduces the scope of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the crisis has not disappeared; rather it simply has migrated across Syria's borders to neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, which together have absorbed millions of refugees. Moreover, although Syria has exported a large portion of its humanitarian problems in this manner, the problems remaining within its borders are vast in scope. It needs to contend with 6.5 million displaced persons who,[7] in practice, are refugees in their own country; hundreds of thousands of people who have sustained various degrees of injury; and the need to rebuild its cities and destroyed infrastructure. In this context, it is important to note that during the civil war, the regime repeatedly employed a strategy of intentionally targeting public infrastructure in order to subdue the rebels. For example, in Aleppo, hospitals were bombed repeatedly until they were all reduced to rubble.
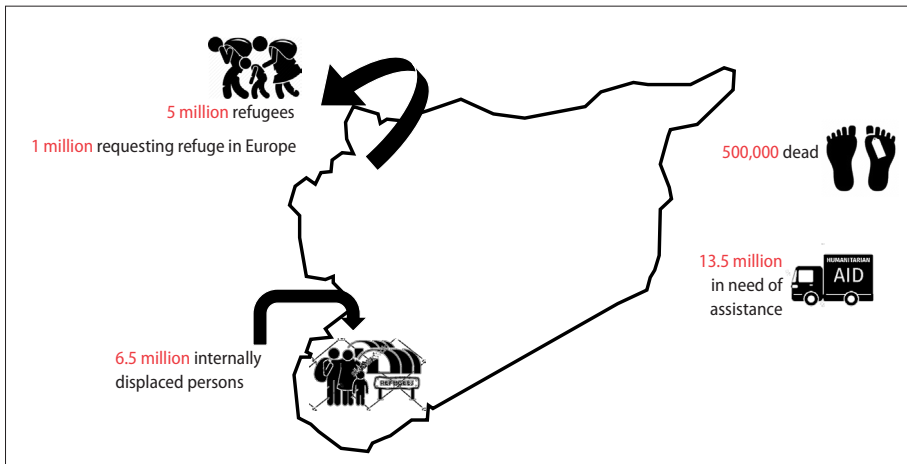
Figure 3: The Humanitarian Crisis

Another blow sustained by Syria has been the dramatic reduction in the size of its population. When the civil war broke out in 2011, the country's population stood at approximately twenty-three million inhabitants. By early 2018, estimates place it at seventeen million. In addition to the five million refugees, more than half a million people have been killed, which bears immediate and direct consequences for the Syrian labor force.

Another major problem with likely long-term impact is the fate and functioning of the "lost generation"; that is, the children of Syria, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The war has also disrupted this population's orderly access to institutions of learning and professional training, which will certainly have a negative impact on the economic functioning of the Alawite entity in particular and the Syrian state as a whole, for at least a generation, if not longer. This long-term trauma—and its long-term implications for the individual and the collective—will have a major effect in shaping the future of Syria and in the attempt to reconstitute the resilience of the people. Contending with the challenges of assisting and facilitating the re-socialization of Syria's young generation, as well as with the larger-scale social changes that can be expected after the war, will be critically important to Syria's future and its stability, no less than providing an immediate solution to the humanitarian crisis—that is, the immediate needs of the population, such as food, medical care, shelter, and security.

Likelihood and Expectancy

Since the onset of the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, the chances of the scenario of the survival of the Alawite regime being realized in some form have increased significantly. The policy guiding the US administration under President Obama of refraining from large scale military intervention in Syria also increased the probability of this scenario. The trauma of military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the fact that Libya became a failing state as a result of Western military aid in toppling the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, contributed to the Obama administration's restrained response to the developments in Syria. President Trump has been quoted as saying that he does not regard the ousting of Assad as a condition for a settlement.[8] However, two days after Assad's air force attacked rebels and civilians with chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun in northern Syria in April 2017, President Trump changed his position and ordered a retaliatory strike against the Syrian air force base at al-Shayrat near Homs and proclaimed that the Assad regime needed to be toppled.[9] In addition, the Trump administration has announced that it will implement a more aggressive policy against IS and al-Qaeda elements and, at the same time, has identified Iran as "the heart of the problem in the Middle East." It has also promised the Sunni states that the United States will not accept Iranian hegemony in the region. At the same time, the absence of a coherent and consistent US policy makes it difficult to determine whether the United States can be expected to increase or reduce its intervention in Syria. Based on President Trump's most recent actions (including the order to stop the provision of weapons to Syria), it appears that even despite its clear interests, the United States is not interested in becoming excessively involved in this arena.

Throughout the entire civil war, Russia and the Iranian-led pro-Assad coalition have demonstrated much greater resolve and unity than the forces supporting the rebels. Thus far, there have been very few mishaps between Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, whereas Saudi Arabia has not succeeded in building a stable coalition with Turkey—or with any other Sunni state for that matter—against the Assad regime to counter balance the support it receives from its allies. If Russia and Iran succeed in completing the process of formulating ceasefire arrangements and establishing de-escalation zones in coordination with Turkey, the chances of Assad's opponents toppling his regime will decrease even further.

Although the forces involved in the war in Syria appear to have come to terms, to a certain extent, with the possibility of the Assad regime remaining in power, this does not mean that they are supportive of such an outcome. Furthermore, the Alawite entity will find it difficult to raise funds to rebuild the country and will have even more trouble securing recognition and legitimacy in the international arena. In addition, opposition strongholds still remain in Syria, and Assad's army will be too weak to uproot them altogether.[10] Therefore, opposition groups, and especially the Salafi-Jihadist factions, can be expected to continue to fight the regime both within and outside the country. The advantage enjoyed by the Salafi-Jihadist groups in Syria is their connections with similar groups operating in Iraq, North Africa, and the Sahel, and their ability to move forces from one arena to another. Thus, it can safely be assumed that even if the war in Syria is formally declared to be over, the Salafi-Jihadist groups will continue their efforts to undermine the regime as much as possible. At the same time, these organizations may take advantage of the partial calm in order to focus their efforts on carrying out terrorist attacks around the world, especially in the West. The representatives of the legitimate opposition groups (who have been recognized by the West) will continue to operate against the Assad regime using the means (primarily diplomatic and propaganda related) at their disposal, and they will likely continue to try to prevent the provision of international aid for the rehabilitation of the areas under its control.

In the long run, Iran will almost certainly be the source of funding for the Alawite entity, although it is expected that Russia will endure heavy expenses in Syria, as it may need to leave a relatively small force in place for a long period in order to maintain relative stability and to assuage the concerns of Israel and the Sunni states regarding Iran's presence and Iranian dominance in Syria. Alawite rule will continue to be dependent on external assistance for many years, while Hezbollah, it seems, will continue to control the security zone it established along the border with Lebanon and will operate throughout Syria as necessary. Even if the international institutions refer to the Alawite entity as "Syria," it is doubtful whether it will be possible to relate to it as an independent or sovereign entity in the coming years while under Russian and/or Iranian patronage.

In conclusion, the resolute and robust Russian and Iranian intervention in support of Assad (with the assistance of the Shiite militias in general and Hezbollah in particular) not only saved the regime from total collapse but

also gave Assad hope—to which he repeatedly gives public expression—that he will be able to reestablish control over all parts of Syria. This hope is also based on the many deep splits dividing Syria's opposition elements. Although Assad undoubtedly has succeeded in solidifying his control over central parts of the country and appears to have a good chance of establishing control over additional areas, the road to the regime's control over all parts of Syria remains long and uncertain. Currently, it is a priority for the Assad regime to reassert its control over eastern Syria, as this region contains critical resources, primarily oil and natural gas that are essential to the country's rehabilitation.[11] Another reason that this region is of critical importance to the regime is its desire to ensure the Shiite axis territorial continuity from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. This plan cannot be actualized without a continuation of the massive commitment of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. And even if it is ultimately realized, Syria will remain a weak and vulnerable state incapable of playing independent role in the international sphere and be completely dependent on the powers supporting it. Whereas Russian dominance can be expected to continue into the more immediate future, Iran's role is likely to expand and become increasingly decisive as time passes. A massive Iranian presence will, of course, be an even greater source of regional tension than Russia's.

If the scenario of reestablished Alawite control over the entire country, which many regard as utopian, is realized, Syria can be expected to recover more rapidly than if it remains divided. But the recovery of a united Syria is also likely to be a monumental undertaking. It was estimated that by the end of 2015, the cost of the Syrian crisis had reached approximately $255 billion, and that another $200 billion would be required to rebuild the country's infrastructure.[12] In conditions of calm, which are currently nowhere on the horizon, Syria would require twenty years to work its way back up to its pre-war GDP (which in itself was not impressive).[13] In other words, even if Syria reverts to being a single unified state and succeeds in focusing on its economic rehabilitation—with massive external assistance—it can expect a gloomy economic future.

The assessment becomes more optimistic when discussing a separate Alawite entity. Alawite areas were the most stable regions during the years of fighting, and their inhabitants currently enjoy the best economic situation in Syria. The poverty rates in the Alawite governorates of Latakia and Tartous are lower than in the other governorates (approximately 75 percent

as opposed to 85 percent), and the school attendance rates of children in the Alawite governorates are also higher than in any other governorate in the country.[14] Therefore, from the perspective of the enormous damage inflicted on human capital, the coastal region is in better shape than other parts of the country. Additional advantages enjoyed by the coastal region include its access to the Mediterranean Sea and the fact that its agricultural sector was only slightly impacted by the war.[15] Still, Tartous and Latakia accounted for 10 percent of the Syrian GDP prior to the war.[16] This area is also devoid of natural resources and industries, with the exception of the Baniyas refinery, which is estimated to refine approximately 125,000 barrels of oil per day.[17] Therefore, the rehabilitation of the Alawite entity along the Syrian coast—isolated from the rest of the country—will be dependent on the long-term external aid of Iran and Russia.

Federative Features

The implementation of a federative solution to the conflict in Syria would essentially be a compromise between the state's actual dismantling into cantons and the desire to preserve the state entity that existed prior to 2011. This solution would require reaching a superpower-mediated settlement regarding the establishment of three cantons—Alawite, Sunni, and Kurdish—and the nature of the relationship between them within the federation that is established. If an ultimately successful attempt is made to reach such a settlement, the outcome will be Syria's reversion into a united nation state.

From an economic perspective, the federative scenario is one of the most positive prospects imaginable. This is because its implementation assumingly will encourage the international community, especially the West, to take action to rebuild the federative state. The West, and especially western European states, have an immense interest in the reconstruction of Syria. As noted, there are 6.5 million displaced persons currently in Syria whom the West would rather not have joining the five million who have already fled the country. The reconstruction of Syria would allow these displaced people to return to their homes and would also possibly motivate at least some of the five million refugees to return to their homeland. Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, where most of the refugees are living, would certainly be enthusiastic supporters of a federative settlement that includes a plan for refugee repatriation.
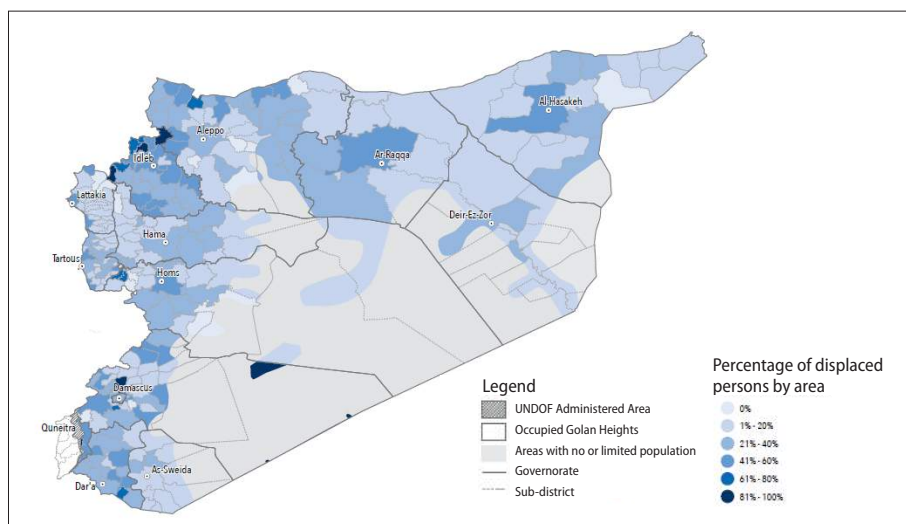
Figure 4: Map of the Internally Displaced Persons, based on the 2017 UN Report
Source: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017_Syria_hno_161205.pdf.

The process leading to a federation could occur via several channels. The United States and Russia could advance a process that would result in the establishment of a federation, based on their recognition that military might not be able to determine the outcome of the war. Such cooperation would provide a significant tailwind for a settlement that would leave Syria unified within a framework of central rule on the one hand and would provide a solution for the political aspirations of the parties to the fighting on the other hand. It can also be presumed that at least the United States would support such a measure by promising economic incentives. An initial step in the federative direction has already been taken with the establishment of de-escalation zones in accordance with the state of the forces on the ground. This Russian initiative, which was agreed to by Turkey and Iran, also received support from the United States.[18]

Additionally, the regional powers might conclude that continuing the fighting is pointless and agree to a compromise that is not ideal from their perspective but that allows them to safeguard some of their interests. For example, Iran could be convinced that a weak federation is preferable, in which it enjoys influence over the Alawite backbone and a land corridor from Tehran via Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut; Turkey could be convinced that a weak federation in Syria is preferable to a fully autonomous Kurdish

region that aspires to unify with the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq; and Saudi Arabia might settle for not all of Syria becoming an Iranian satellite state.

Russia is already working on several levels to advance a federative settlement. For this purpose, it is assisting Assad in solidifying his rule along the coastal strip but also forcing him to talk to the rebels in international forums; and, at the same time, it has agreed that eastern Syria will be a region under American influence. Russia's conduct appears to indicate that it is striving for a situation in which Assad (or another Alawite leader that will remain loyal to Russia and have the capacity to govern) will head the federation that is to be established. The United States, for its part, is focusing on totally liberating eastern Syria from the control of IS and is trying to reach an agreement with local forces that are not loyal to Assad to fill the vacuum. In this way, the United States is also helping to promote the federative structure.

Nevertheless, the positions of the local forces render the picture more complex. One precondition for advancing a federative plan is reaching a non-belligerence agreement between Assad and the "legitimate" (in Western eyes) rebels—that is to say, those who are not aligned with IS or al-Qaeda. However, reaching such an agreement will be a high hurdle to clear, as "the unity of Syria" within its previous borders remains a banner of the Syrian opposition, whose positions regarding the federative idea are derived from this fundamental principle. The opposition recognizes the need for the formation of a new political order that will give expression to Syria's diverse population and the elements of power, defend their interests and rights, and create a stable governing framework for them. However, it also adheres to the idea that this goal needs to be achieved not by means of a federation, which would divide Syria into semi-sovereign sectarian entities (religious or party-based) that are subject to the excessively loose authority of the central government.

The Kurds can be expected to support the federative equation if it allows them to retain their autonomy, and especially if it enables them to establish territorial continuity along the border with Turkey—that is, to establish a link between Kobani in northeast Syria, on the border with Turkey, and Afrin in northwest Syria, also on the Turkish border. Turkey, for its part, rejects the idea of Kurdish autonomy and, even more intensely, opposes Kurdish territorial continuity along the entire border with Syria. Thus far, Turkey has used force to prevent the two Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria from
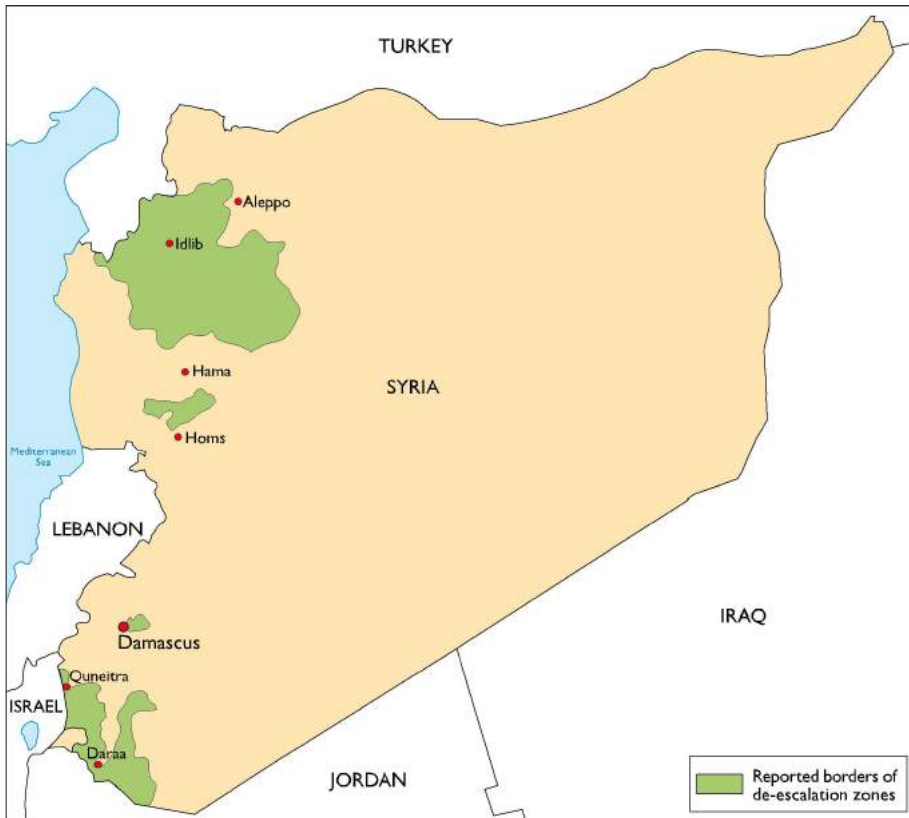
Figure 5: Map of the De-Escalation Zones in Syria

Source: Russian Defense Ministry, *al-Jazeera*. Map by Avigdor Orgad.

connecting with one another. To prevent this from occurring in the future, Turkey has transferred land to Assad that it seized between the two enclaves.

Likelihood and Expectancy

On paper, the chances of a federative Syria are relatively high. In practice, Syria today is already composed of autonomous units, a few of which are reasonably functioning. In certain regions, the opposition has managed to establish local governments that have succeeded in providing basic services to the local population. From this perspective, making this arrangement permanent will not require far-reaching changes, although it will require agreement on the nature of the central government and the scope of autonomy enjoyed by the local self-governments.

To be sure, from the perspective of the world powers, a federative settlement offers clear advantages. As noted, Russia in practice is working to achieve a final scenario along these lines that is consistent with its interests, as this will allow it to retain its military assets in Syria, located in territories controlled by the loyal and supportive Alawite government. Moreover, a federative settlement will also enable Russia to achieve future influence over additional areas of the federation (for example, in the Kurdish region that is likely to be established in the north). A federative settlement offers significant advantages from an American perspective as well. It will reduce Iranian influence in Syria; prevent IS and al-Qaeda from acquiring territorial bases there; reduce the ethnic and religious violence in the country; and help promote the country's stabilization.

On a regional level, the chances of success of a federative solution will increase as the prospects of realizing the other options decrease. Promoting the idea of a federation will require a formal discussion about unity that will create the image of a nation state with a central government. The regional powers—except for Turkey, which harbors concerns that a federative solution will ultimately endanger its territorial wholeness—will apparently prefer this option if it reduces, and perhaps terminates, Iran's influence in Syria and if the central government in Syria is weakened.

The Syrian opposition argues that a federative solution will be detrimental to the unity of the Syrian people and will obligate Syrian citizens to redefine their identity and their relationship to the state in the absence of a shared national basis, whereas the different federations will be characterized by distinct sectarian and religious identities. At the same time, the opposition may regard this situation as preferable to the absolute rule of the Alawite minority, whether under the leadership of Assad or another leader.

In any event, finding a solution of Syria's division along sectarian lines faces significant obstacles. The major problem is the difficulty of demarcating the borders between the different parts of the federation, as the diverse sectoral populations throughout Syria are intertwined with one another and not always concentrated within specific territories. Another significant obstacle is the fact that most local elements in Syria oppose the idea of a federation. The main local party that supports the idea is the Kurds (making the idea even less attractive to other parties), who have already started building all the infrastructure necessary to become a functioning entity within a federative framework, if and when it is established.

Adversaries of the federation solution offer several explanations for their opposition. One is that the establishment of a federation will make Syria vulnerable over time to the external influence of interested parties who will attempt to prevent it from becoming a strong and sovereign political entity. Another is the concern that movement toward a federative settlement will make unity within the ranks of the different opposition organizations more difficult to achieve (as each group will aspire to achieve maximum independence within the framework of the federation), which would impair the efforts to push onto the sidelines IS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra) that renamed itself after disengaging from al-Qaeda.

Another possible solution is to preserve the unity of Syria and to establish a government containing representation of all the major elements in the country. If such a solution—which would require the bitter enemies of yesterday to begin cooperating with one another—were to crystallize, the international community would have to provide as much assistance as possible in promoting reconciliation and preventing inter-group violence and revenge campaigns. In this context, among other things, it would need to avoid repeating the severe miscalculation made by the United States in 2003 after the conquest of Iraq: favoring one community over the others. Because of the centrality of the Alawite government, the powers will require a supervisory mechanism to prevent the oppression of the other communities. Although the solution of sector-based governance (familiar from Lebanon) would encounter numerous obstacles, if ultimately achieved, it would ease the country's rehabilitation. The rehabilitation of a federative state with weak links among its different parts is likely to be more complicated and drawn-out and therefore much more expensive.

The undertaking, however, will require more than an international supervisory mechanism. The success of a federative plan (regardless of whether it is a plan for a federative state or a federative government) will require international guarantees regarding the establishment of a central army, restrictions on the armament of the different militias, and the establishment of a rotation in the federal security forces according to a sectoral index. If these three goals are met, the chances of rehabilitating Syria and developing its economy will increase. As noted, this will also be an immense undertaking for the world powers, making it necessary to mobilize not only state actors but also non-state organizations for this purpose.

Based on the cumulative experience thus far, it can be assumed with reasonable certainty that the regional powers will continue to meddle in Syria's internal affairs and to try—whether directly or indirectly—to sabotage the fragile settlements that would be formulated in order to establish the federation. In that case, the situation in Syria will resemble the situation in Iraq today: a state in which one crisis follows another and the central regime is unable to impose full sovereignty and reign in the continuous hostility among the different parties. As in Iraq, the regional powers will also play an active role in the events in Syria: Iran will undoubtedly continue to aid the Alawites, and Turkey will probably attempt to establish its influence over the Kurdish region. Naturally, this external intervention will intensify Syria's political weakness. In other words, and notwithstanding potential advantages of a federative solution in Syria, both internal elements and powerful external parties are opposed to efforts to advance such a settlement.

Elements of the Syrian opposition, particularly its representatives in the diaspora, argue that the solution for Syria's internal divisions is to be found in the establishment of a pluralistic democracy, not a federation. They believe that increasing the sense of unity between the components of Syrian society will require establishing a representative regime and formulating a constitution that ensures a shared life for all citizens of the country, without discrimination based on religion, sectoral origin, or ethnic background. At the same time, they support an expansion of the powers of the provincial autonomies at the expense of the central government but are opposed to the re-demarcation of the governorates on a sectarian basis. According to opposition elements, the governorates need to be administered by local administrators that possess extensive powers and are committed to the achievement of two goals: the shaping of a new order that gives expression to the needs of all interest groups without detrimentally impacting the territorial integrity of the state, and the weakening of the central government in Damascus vis-à-vis the governorates in a manner that prevents the tyranny that has been characteristic of the Assad regime.

This vision of a united Syria in which all elements cooperate with each other appears to be completely disconnected from the current reality of intense hatred against the background of the blood that has been spilled—on both sides—during the civil war. But even if external pressure could bring together most of the disputing parties (except for the Salafi-Jihadists, which

are supposed to be eradicated in this scenario), there will always be insurgent organizations attempting to undermine the new government.

The efforts to establish a federation in Syria lay bare the gaps that exist between the international and regional interests of the external parties and the wishes of the local forces. The balance that exists within the federative structure—between maintaining the familiar borders of the state and the division into cantons—addresses the state-powers' need to stabilize the Syrian system and to preserve its territorial integrity and, at the same time, attend to the needs and desires of all parts of the population. However, despite that the processes—as perceived six years after the outbreak of the war—are leading to a federative structure, most of the forces operating in Syria oppose breaking up Syrian unity and, at least according to their official statements, have no interest in relinquishing control over all the territory and population of Syria. If in any event the international powers increase their interests, and the immense support for the establishment of a federation tips the scales, the major challenge will be to create a functioning mechanism to regulate relations between the forces in Syria without bringing about a quick regression to a state of war. Perhaps the flexibility of the federative plan may well be the key to maintaining long-term stability.

The Sunni Enclave

In order for the Sunni forces to achieve autonomy, the United States and Russia would have to conclude that the war in Syria should not end in an unequivocal victory for the Alawite regime and therefore settle for the Sunnis' formal agreement to the establishment of this regime—in exchange for autonomy. Such a plan will be feasible even in the absence of a united Alawite-controlled state, and despite the existence of autonomous entities within the state as long as it is made clear to Russia through contacts with the rebels and the parties supporting them, that Russia will be able to ensure its interests in Syria and will receive guarantees to this effect.

Closer relations between Turkey and the Iranian-Russia alliance would not contribute to bringing the civil war to an end. On the contrary, it would most likely bring about further deterioration of the situation, causing greater distance between the different parties; intensify Turkey's concerns vis-à-vis Russian and Iranian dominance and its interest in increasing its political and economic influence in the region. As a result, Turkey will be willing to invest resources in creating a Sunni alliance in Syria to serve as a counterweight

to the Assad regime and especially to the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Saudi Arabia will continue to view the Alawite regime as an enemy and an important target in its struggle against Iran, and would therefore be willing to grant economic aid to rehabilitating the Sunni region.

As for the Sunni enclave that already exists these days in practice in Syria, the Sunni factions (including the different opposition elements and the Salafi-Jihadist groups) can be expected to achieve a relatively high level of unity. Signs of this are already evident on the ground: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham consists of some fifty different groups and organizations. The military campaign is likely to be led by the Salafi groups with a more local orientation, such as Ahrar al-Sham, which is an umbrella organization encompassing smaller groups and organizations, including the branch of Jaysh al-Islam in Idlib. Based on an understanding that the Alawite regime is here to stay, the Sunni rebels will try to establish themselves in some of the enclaves where they had seized control and will administer a semi-autonomous Sunni entity.

The damages and trauma caused by the war will remain for many years, and the "lost generation" will face many difficulties that will have a decisive impact on the economic functioning of the state. A pragmatic political settlement offers a chance at returning some of the refugees to an autonomous Sunni region. The neighboring countries to which millions of refugees have fled can be expected to impose severe restrictions on the refugees within their borders in order to encourage them to return to Syria. Still, the continued existence of central Alawite rule is liable to deter many refugees from voluntarily returning to their homeland.

The "legitimate" Syrian opposition (as seen in the eyes of western states) aspires at least to maintain its military strength vis-à-vis the Assad regime and its allies and, if possible, to increase it with the assistance of external parties. The military activity of this opposition during the period of settlements will have two goals: first, to defend its territorial assets as well as to expand them (if such an opportunity exists on the ground), to maintain balances of power, and to deter its enemies; and second, to strengthen the civilian dimensions of governance (economic, educational, medical, and so forth) that will endow the opposition with legitimacy among the local populations subject to its authority and among the internally displaced persons and the refugees who find shelter in their territory. Strengthening the civilian dimensions will be critical to the opposition's ability to establish itself as an alternative to

both the regime and the Jihadist forces and to cultivate a sense of identity, allegiance, and belonging among the supportive communities.

The chances of realizing these aims, however, appear to be extremely slim given the prevailing regional and international conditions during the seventh year of the war. The pointlessness of continuing the hostilities (under the current conditions) is almost certainly evident to the "legitimate" opposition. Although the opposition's chances of achieving even what it regards as the minimum appear to be slim, it apparently has reached the conclusion that continuing the hostilities will not serve its interests. The division within its ranks, its military weakness, the erosion of its status at home and abroad, and the regional and international powers' disinclination to throw their full weight behind the opposition are all factors placing it in an uncomfortable position to continue fighting.

To achieve its goals, the opposition needs assistance from regional and international parties in funding, provisions, and knowledge. The opposition also needs its territories to be classified as "safe zones," which was discussed during the political settlement process that Russia tried to put together at the Asthana conference in Kazakhstan in June 2017. If the territory under opposition control is classified as a safe zone, this will protect it from attacks in general and airstrikes in particular. Under such a defensive umbrella, which, if established, will include northern and southern Syria, the opposition will be able to strengthen itself in the military and civilian realm. This, in turn, will allow it to begin moving toward a somewhat more normal everyday life. It will also be able to take advantage of its build-up in order to achieve a more favorable settlement in the future. On the other hand, the continuation of fighting will almost certainly result in further weakening of the opposition forces vis-à-vis the regime. This will obligate the opposition to demonstrate greater flexibility toward its terms for a political settlement and, ultimately, will compel it to accept a settlement that includes central Alawite rule and extremely partial autonomy for the Sunni entity.[19]

Likelihood and Expectancy

Although the rebel forces have enjoyed the support of Turkey and Saudi Arabia throughout the conflict, Turkey's increasingly close relations with Russia and Iran beginning in the second half of 2016 have reduced Ankara's commitment to the rebels. Saudi Arabia has supported the rebels since the beginning of the war, providing them with financial assistance, weapons, and

ammunition. However, despite its declarations of an intention to expand its assistance to the rebels, it has thus far refrained from doing so. One reason for the weakness of the rebels is that Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the two major Sunni powers, have not managed to cooperate on the issue of Syria. Despite the weakness of the Sunni rebels, however, the very existence of a Sunni majority in the country constitutes a good foundation for building a legitimate base for a functioning Sunni entity. Moreover, parties that would be extremely hesitant about assisting in the reconstruction of an Alawite-controlled Syria would be much more willing to help a Sunni entity. Such a scenario would also encourage the Syrian diaspora, which is predominantly Sunni and has already established itself in other countries (or will do so in the future), to send money to relatives in Syria in order to assist in their rehabilitation and to help the growth of the state in general and of the Sunni enclave in particular.

An issue that is liable to weaken the Sunni entity is the internal divisions, which are likely to develop regarding its character, especially over the question of whether it will have a pluralistic democratic government or one that is religious in character. The further the Sunni entity strays from a pluralistic character, the more likely the aid that the state receives from the West will decrease. Still, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are likely to continue providing the Sunni entity with significant aid. The rebels' troubles include the many splits in its ranks and the absence of any red lines on the part of Assad's regime and its allies. Indeed, these forces implemented a strategy of total warfare against the rebels, including the use of sieges, starvation, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and intentional injury to people, also by means of the massive use of chemical weapons. This strategy, which can only be classified as a series of war crimes, repeatedly resulted in the physical and moral breakdown of the rebels.[20]

Although the Sunnis, who constitute a majority of the country's population, have enjoyed the support of numerous international parties throughout the war, including the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, this support was not comparable to the support received by Assad from the advocates of his regime: Russia and Iran. Both countries followed this course of action despite their own sizable Sunni populations. After displaying such great determination to support their client and after investing many resources in preserving its regime, it is difficult to imagine a state of affairs in which they would reduce their support for Assad. As far as Russia is concerned, it has

been a worthwhile investment, as Russia has strengthened its international status due to its proven determination to defend its allies. For Iran, it is an investment that is critical for realizing its strategic dream scenario: territorial continuity from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. The fact that Iran has retreated from its traditional forms of activity—that is, subversion and clandestine support—and has started to engage in open intervention is indicative of the immense importance it assigns to preserving Assad's rule. Hezbollah's intervention in the war in Syria, in which it suffered heavy losses, also required a change in its traditional modes of operation, by opening a new front alongside its continued struggle against Israel. It can be assumed that Hezbollah will not want to withdraw from the security zone it established in eastern Syria, as this position will make it easier for it to defend its assets within Lebanon.

Notably, under the Obama administration, the United States demonstrated only limited willingness to intervene in the civil war in Syria. This trend appears to have continued during the Trump administration, despite the precision attacks it initiated against an air force base of the Assad regime in response to the use of chemical weapons against civilians. As of the time of writing, the American administration is concentrating its efforts in Syria against IS,[21] and the US forces in Syria have been increased to complete this undertaking.

Thus, the most likely scenario regarding the Sunni majority in Syria is the one that will enable it to achieve, at most, an enclave within a semi-federative framework that would be subordinate to an Alawite central government. However, to achieve even this modest accomplishment, the rebel forces will need to significantly increase their cooperation among their own ranks, which is something they have thus far found difficult to do.

The Kurdish Entity

Realizing the scenario of a Kurdish autonomy will be contingent first and foremost on the Kurds' defeat of IS fighters in northern Syria and their ability to link all the Kurdish territories into one contiguous territory. But more will be required. To fulfill their dream, the Kurds will need the continued support of both the United States and Russia, which appears to be quite feasible. The American administration views the SDF, based on Kurdish forces (YPG), as a strategic ally in its war against IS and translated this approach into an operative decision, including increasing its provision of arms to the Kurds,

with heavy weaponry, leading up to the campaign to liberate al-Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State. The campaign was successful, and al-Raqqa as well as the most areas in northeastern Syria were liberated from IS control in October 2017. From Russia's perspective, its support for the Kurds is, among other things, a means of putting pressure on Turkey. For this reason, it maintains good relations with them. This, however, has not deterred Russia from authorizing the entry of Turkish ground forces into Syria in the summer of 2016, a move that was aimed primarily against the Kurds.

The measure that would most effectively ensure the establishment and thriving of a Kurdish autonomy in the long term would be a change in Ankara's position on the independence of the Kurds in northern Syria, if the Kurds succeed in convincing the Turkish government that it only stands to gain from the establishment of a Kurdish buffer zone in northern Syria. This would mean removing the greatest obstacle currently facing the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy. It can be assumed that Turkish renewal of the dialogue with the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, would have a positive influence on relations with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK. If such a change does not occur regarding the Kurds in Turkey itself, it is doubtful whether such a change will occur vis-à-vis the Kurds in Syria.

Not only are the Kurds a small minority group in the country (numbering approximately two million people out of the seventeen million inhabitants of Syria remaining in the country), they are also likely to be a minority (40 percent) in the territory in which they hope to establish their autonomy.[22] Nonetheless, in March 2016, the Kurds proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, also known as Rojava, which is home to some four million inhabitants. Economically speaking, a separate Kurdish entity could apparently base itself on agriculture and the oil resources in northern Syria. If this Kurdish entity succeeds in acquiring a maritime outlet (the chances of which are slim), this will increase the motivation of the regional Kurdish government in northern Iraq to cooperate with it, among other things, for transporting some of the oil it produces in northern Iraq through its territory.

Another obstacle blocking the path of the Kurds in Syria to autonomy, and perhaps also independence, is the differences of opinion that exist among them, not in terms of the disagreements regarding the issues that are unique to the Kurds in Syria but divisions on the Pan-Kurdish level, such

as between the PKK operating in Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (of Masoud Barzani, who heads the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq). The dominant political force in the Kurdish region of Syria is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), although many Kurds from Syria identify with the KDP. In any event, if the Kurds in Syria succeed in attaining some degree of independence, it will be the achievement primarily of the PYD, and it is doubtful whether the divisions among the different Kurdish factions will significantly undermine the stability of the new entity.

From an economic perspective, the Kurdish entity in northern Syria holds important assets, although its ability to take advantage of them depends on its relations with its neighbors. Prior to the war, the oil fields of northern Syria (al-Malikiyah and al-Shadadi) produced approximately one-third of all Syrian oil, which amounted to 380,000 barrels of oil per day. Today, the numbers are much lower due to substandard maintenance and the closing of pipelines. Nonetheless, the potential to produce oil still exists and could enable the Kurdish regime to achieve energy independence in the future. The primary difficulty of exploiting the oil located within the borders of the Kurdish entity is political; indeed, the direct shipment of oil to Turkey appears to be impossible due to the Kurds' tense relations with the Turkish government. If the original pipeline to Baniyas were to reopen, the Kurds could sell oil to the Syrian government. However, the Syrian government can be expected to refuse to pay full price for natural resources that it regards as its own. Another possibility is the use of the pipeline running between Turkey and the Kurdish region in Iraq. But realizing this option is dependent on reaching agreements between the Kurdish entities in Syria and Iraq, which, based on the current state of relations between these two entities, will be difficult to achieve. In any event, using the Iraqi pipeline will require the payment of a kind of fee to the Kurds in Iraq.[23]

Even before the war, the Kurdish region suffered from a significant shortage of water and resulting damage to agriculture, which constituted the main source of local income. Excessive water usage on the Turkish side of the border resulted in the decreased availability of water in northern Syria, and the water shortage (and additional problems, such as sharp increases in the price of fuel for the pumps) caused a significant reduction in the cultivated lands in the northern portion of the country. When the war ends, the water shortage is liable to be the major problem facing the Kurdish entity in

northern Syria. To overcome it, the Kurdish entity will need to reach water agreements with Iraq or Turkey.[24]

All the problems of the autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria share one common cause: its isolation. The solution to this isolation, in addition to the establishment of relations with the Kurdish entity in Iraq and with Turkey, is opening a corridor to the Mediterranean Sea. The Kurdish entity in northern Syria could achieve such a corridor by force or through agreement, although as of today, the chance of success of either option is extremely slim. The area between the Kurdish entity and the Mediterranean Sea is also home to a non-Kurdish population, and, as if that were not enough, Turkey can be expected to fiercely oppose the establishment of such a corridor.[25]

Chaotic Features

The lack of a decisive outcome in the Syrian civil war perpetuates the split between the different parties involved in the fighting and their contradictory agendas. This is likely to make it easier for radical elements to solidify their positions on the ground. The progress being made in defeating IS would not prevent the strengthening of other radical Islamic forces with ties to world jihad, as well as that of more "moderate" local elements, such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.

The scenario of the establishment of a Salafi-Jihadist entity in Syria is not the preferred strategic choice of one side or another. Rather, if realized, it will be the product of the lack of a decisive military outcome, the absence of resolution, and the continuation of the circumstances that have prevailed throughout the war thus far. Despite the clear problems with this scenario, it may be the most likely of all scenarios as long as the various Islamist movements continue to refuse to compromise on their demand for Islamic rule based on Sharia law, and as long as all parties believe that they have the ability to expand their assets, regard war as a sum-zero game in which the loser is liable to be destroyed, and are willing to bear the heavy costs—in materials and human life— that will result from continued hostilities.

The radical Islamic forces operating in Syria, led by IS, cannot, by their very nature, be true partners to resolution. They can be expected to adhere to a policy of continuing the military struggle even if doing so brings them to a dead end. At the most, they will shift their focus to fighting on fronts in which they judge their chances of success to be more realistic. Indeed, the Salafi-Jihadist forces appear to be the most eager to continue fighting. As

far as they are concerned, military outcome or political resolution is liable to lead to the reestablishment of the unified Syrian army, which would be the dominant force in the region, whereas continuing hostilities will make it easier for them to operate and prevent their adversaries from joining forces against them.
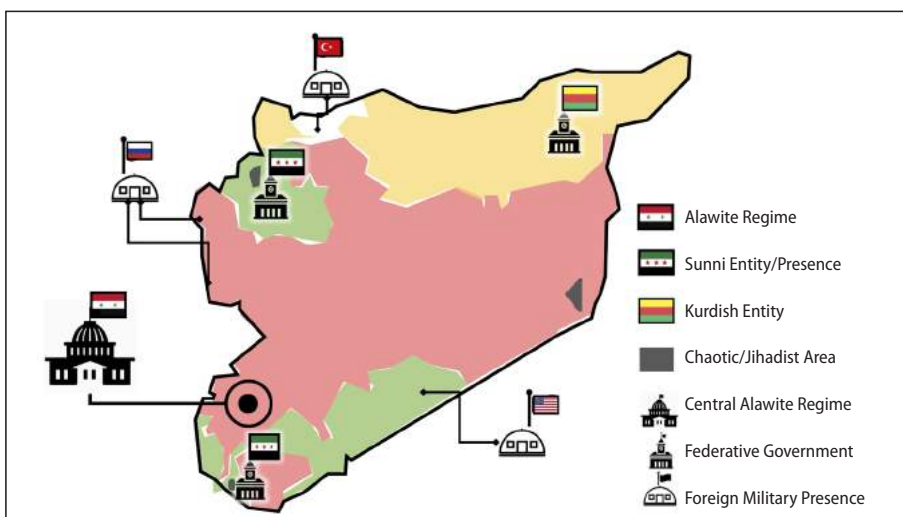
Figure 6: Syria "the Day After": A Hybrid Political Order

The Hybrid System in Syria:
Implications and Recommendations for Israel

From the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Israel adopted a policy of non-intervention and limited itself to watching the events from the standoff position. At the same time, it took focused action against concrete and imminent threats that developed as a result of the fighting, such as spillover of firing into Israeli territory and the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. This policy, which also included the provision of humanitarian aid to Syrian populations across the border, emanated from Israel's desire to remain outside the circles of fighting and the regional upheaval. Also influential was the understanding that the mutual wearing down of radical enemies was in Israel's best interests and that any intervention on its part was liable to harm related interests. Another reason that has prevented Israel from intervening in the fighting in Syria is the fact that its potential allies are few and extremely weak and that it does not have any significant lever of influence over the developments. The prevalent assessment is that during the initial years of the war, this policy provided Israel with many advantages; first and foremost, it allowed Israel to avoid unnecessary military entanglement.

Until the fall of 2015, when Russia commenced its active military intervention in Syria, Israel held a potential trump card: its destructive capacity, particularly its ability to critically injure the regime of Bashar al-Assad and even to bring about his downfall. This threat was a significant one, although extremely difficult to carry out. Israel was largely stripped of this card, however, with the deployment of Russian troops in Syria and the establishment of a pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran, with the participation of Iran's various proxies, most prominently Hezbollah. As a result, Israel needs to reformulate its policy toward Syria. As a solution to

the civil war in Syria currently is being formulated, according to which the state will become decentralized with a weakened central regime, it no longer appears possible to refrain from entering the Syrian quagmire, as failing to do so would mean remaining devoid of influence over the trends now underway and over the settlements that will take place in southern Syria in general and in the Golan Heights in particular. Therefore, Israel now needs to consider changing its policy toward Syria from one of sitting on the fence to a more proactive approach.

Israel's Political and Security Interests

1. *Security calm and stability in the northern arena.* To this aim, Israel needs to designate a responsible party in Syria with whom it can agree on specific rules of the game; to facilitate the removal of negative, destabilizing elements from the Golan Heights; and to drive a wedge between the central regime in Damascus and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

2. *Prevention of solidifying of political and military strength in Syria by Iran and its proxies in Syria and reducing Iranian influence in shaping Syria at a geographical, government, and military level.* As noted, Iran's primary goal is to establish a territorially contiguous corridor under its control between Tehran in the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the west, via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran's desire for greater regional influence concerns Israel in several ways, and first and foremost is the Iranian threat to the northern arena. In the first circle of southern Syria, Iran might deploy it proxies, primarily Hezbollah but also other Shiite militias, under the guise of cooperation with the Syrian army loyal to Assad, at a distance that allows quick access to the Golan Heights border zone. This would generate another front in a potential conflict between Hezbollah and Israel—in addition to the Lebanese front—a development Israel would like to prevent. In the second circle, Israel has been working continuously to stop the strengthening of Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon, as Iran has outfitted the organization with thousands of rockets and missiles as well as UAVs capable of causing death and destruction to Israel's strategic and civilian rear. Iran's presence in Syria allows it direct and convenient access to support Hezbollah, thus magnifying the direct threat to Israel. Furthermore, when the situation in Syria stabilizes, Israel's freedom of action against arms shipments to Hezbollah through Syria might be severely curtailed.

The third and widest circles is the further establishment of Iranian dominance in all of Syria, liable to be realized at several levels of involvement: first, turning Syria into an Iranian logistical center including building-up infrastructures for the manufacturing of weapons, providing logistical support, and arming Iranian proxies throughout the region; second, establishing a Syrian Hezbollah, similar to the Lebanese model and the Shiite militias in Iraq. The mission of this force would include defending the regime and Iranian assets in Syria and posing a threat to Israel; third, turning Syria into a type of Iranian protectorate. In a slow, gradual process, Iran is acquiring far-reaching influence over the Syrian area and will strengthen its connection to the 'Shiite crescent' using political, economic, military, and social-demographic levers and assets. This will expand the sphere of friction with Israel and enable it to operate a range of threats that incorporate the capabilities noted in the first and second scenarios. Israel will be required to demonstrate determination in using force and a willingness to break the rules to prevent the deployment of forces by Iran and its proxies particularly in southern Syria.

3. *Strategic coordination with the United States regarding the future of Syria.* To advance this goal, Israel should mobilize the United States to be more involved in the resolution processes in the country and to encourage the expansion of US interests in Syria beyond the dismantling of the Islamic State. Israel-US coordination will serve as a counterweight to Russian domination, primarily regarding issues in which Russian and Israeli interests are at odds with one another, such as Iran's role in Syria and Hezbollah's role in defending Russian interests. It seems that Israel and the Trump administration have a common interest in curbing the growing Iranian influence in the region.

4. *Preserving and further developing strategic understandings and operational coordination with Russia to prevent clashes.* This goal can be achieved by strengthening the political discourse and the operational channels of coordination in order to promote essential Israeli interests, such as the freedom of operational action, particularly in the air, and taking Israel into consideration when making decisions about the reshaping of Syria, primarily in southern Syria and along its borders with Lebanon and Jordan. By reaching understandings with Russia, Israel also seeks to restrain the activity of Iran and its proxies in Syria. Channels of coordination can

also serve as platforms for formulating the rules of the game with Iran and Hezbollah and may also help prevent escalation in times of tension.

5. *Preserving Israel's operational freedom of action in Syria and Lebanon; its freedom of military response to neutralize threats and eradicate terrorism; its freedom of action in Syrian and Lebanese airspace for the sake of intelligence gathering, preparations for the possible round of fighting with Hezbollah and in the northern arena in general, and preventing the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah.* Israel must prepare itself for a situation in which there is an increased threat to its freedom of action in the air, primarily due to the Russian presence in Syria and its provision of advanced air defense systems to the Syrian army and Hezbollah.

6. *Establishing an Israeli region of influence in southern Syria, preferably in coordination with Jordan, for ensuring a stable and calm environment and to prevent extremist elements—Salafi-Jihadist organizations on the one hand and Iranian elements and proxies on the other—from establishing outposts there.* At the same time, Israel must advance the shared Jordanian-Israeli interest of strengthening local communities, which will prevent the activity of terrorist and Jihadi elements in the areas under their control. Israel will also need to establish closer relations with the rebel groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and to help them to be the main factor with a monopoly on power in the region.

7. *Assisting the United States and the American-led international coalition in their fight in eradicating the Islamic State*, primarily through the provision of intelligence and operational knowledge.

Principles of Israeli Policy

According to the currently prevailing assessment, the chances of stabilizing the Syrian arena and reaching an agreed upon settlement—or at least one acceptable to all the parties involved in the war—are minimal. Syria currently serves as an arena of conflict for many different parties, from within Syria and from elsewhere, that are guided by different logics and do not agree on the rules of the game. In such a reality, it makes no sense to seek out a magic remedy or a comprehensive long-term settlement. Rather, the situation requires learning how to live with this "disease" through relentless, ongoing examinations of the events, processes, trends, threats, and opportunities. Based on the findings, it is necessary to develop a strategy of adaptation

and flexibility that combines a solution for the short-term challenges with an eye toward the longer-term future.

In the absence of whole and complete solutions, the focus should be placed on flexible risk management and achieving feasible and limited accomplishments at the lowest cost possible. It means that the problem can be managed but no solution can be expected. Israel must also not rest on its laurels following local successes but rather always should prepare for the next challenge. Israel must also refrain from attempting to implement ambitious independent solutions that could involve it in the Syrian arena and possibly also in a confrontation with Russia. Although the different elements are operating largely in accordance to traditional perceptions of power, the dynamic nature of the events suits the present era. This requires particularly high levels of awareness and readiness, flexible use of the relevant means, and an emphasis on patience, since outcomes are not always immediately clear.

The fundamental premise in formulating Israeli policy is that Syria will not revert to what it was before the breakout of the civil war and will not turn into a stable and pragmatic democracy anytime in the foreseeable future and under the religious-political circumstances prevailing in that worn-torn country and in the Middle East. The scenario of reference is one in which Syria is divided into sectoral-religious and communal enclaves—an Alawitestan, a Kurdistan, a Sunnistan, a Shiastan, and a Druzistan—existing alongside the dominance of Iran and particularly its proxies. IS and al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria are also likely to fit into this puzzle if they are not eradicated.

For Israel to be able to influence the shaping of the Syrian state that will emerge after the civil war, it needs to seek assistance from third parties: Russia, the United States, Jordan, and the Gulf States. By means of coordinating with third parties, Israel will be able to influence trends and motivate them to move in directions that are beneficial to its own interests. At the same time, Israel must seek out opportunities to forge strategic relationships with additional parties in the region, including the Sunni states in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, in addition to establishing ties with opposition elements and former Syrian elites who will be able to influence the formation, stabilization, and character of the country.

Israel is very concerned about the trend that Iran will emerge as the biggest winner of the Syria war. The United States and Russia handed Iran control and influence over Syria on a silver platter and at this point have no desire to confront it. Now Iran is busy tightening its long-term grip on

Syria by building bases and camps for its proxies and infrastructures for the manufacture and storage of advanced weapons. Lately, Iran has even started to call up Syrian, mostly Shiite citizens for a new militia that it is building based on the Hezbollah model. This force may be integrated into Syrian military forces subordinate to Assad, thereby blurring its identification with Iran, which will be able to preserve and nurture a fighting Shiite stronghold in Syria that could be useful especially if, in a future scenario, the arrangement in Syria will include the evacuation of foreign forces. Iran's other purpose is to challenge Israel on the Golan Heights, far from the nuclear sites and home ground, using proxies rather than native Iranian troops.

Israel's policy of not intervening in Syria's affairs has resulted in a lack of influence in the campaign of shaping Syria's future and has left the door open to greater Iranian presence and influence. Only when Israel realized it had been overly passive did it draw red lines that if violated would lead to a military response.

Israel has two options. One is to present a clear position on what is included in its red lines, e.g., Iranian infrastructures for manufacturing, assembling, and storing advanced weapons anywhere in Syria, because these mean a clear and a real threat to Israel and an Iranian entrenchment in Syria that will be difficult to uproot in the future. The other option is to maintain vagueness and draw red lines in action rather than in words, i.e., using military forces on the basis of threat assessments. In the latter option, Israel does not obligate itself to any course of action and creates a high degree of uncertainty for Iran. On the other hand, the vagueness is liable to encourage Iran to test Israel's limitations by taking graduated, incremental steps amounting to a process with potential for an escalation that will be difficult to control.

Limitations and Obstacles

Israel will need to consider the limitations and obstacles that exist in the complicated Syrian arena and to formulate its policy accordingly. A new reality has crystallized on the other side of the border. First and foremost, there is now no single responsible party occupying the palace in Damascus; this state of affairs has been replaced by a system with many different actors organized and operating according to diverse—and more often than not conflicting—logics. The new reality obligates Israel to adapt to the new rules of the game: the old mechanisms of communication and deterrence

that were effective vis-à-vis the Assad regime are not effective regarding the new actors, which include Salafi-Jihadist groups that are not responsible to any specific population and do not operate according to the conventional standards of the international community.

When contending with all the new elements, it is difficult to distinguish their unique attributes due to the partial picture possessed by Israeli intelligence regarding their interests, intentions, and worldviews.[26] This limitation is not unique to Israel. Other countries are also having difficulty formulating an active and constructive policy toward the multitude of Syrian factions, which lack a mature and institutional state-organizational logic. The system is characterized by conflicts of interest and deep ideological and political rifts between the organizations and the patron states that stand behind them. This is the reason why the chances remain very slim for demarcating and implementing an overall policy around which the different parties in Syria can unite. And as if this were not enough, the tendency of the Syrian population and the warring factions to switch allegiances according to the situation on the ground and immediate military and economic needs decreases the chances that the presence of Israel or the international community behind a specific party will create long-term, reliable commitment.

The international community, including the countries in the region, is divided on the question of how to deal with the crisis in Syria. Whereas Israel and the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia tend to regard the Iranian-led radical Shiite axis's seizure of Syria as the major threat, the countries of the West, led by the United States, tend to regard the defeat of IS as their main concern.[27] At the top of Turkey's agenda, on the other hand, is preventing the establishment of an expanded autonomy for the Kurdish minority, and Erdoğan, president of Turkey, has clarified on countless occasions that his country will not permit the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Syria.[28]

In the case of Israel, another difficulty hampering its ability to join an international front vis-à-vis the non-state parties in Syria is the ideological and cultural obstacles resulting from Israel's traditional image in Syrian and Arab public opinion as a threatening and occupying enemy state with which relations are neither permissible nor appropriate. Moreover, contrary to the growing perception in Israel that the Golan Heights is an inseparable part of Israel, most of the groups in Syria, as well as the international community, believe that the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights should be included in a future border settlement with Syria.

Israel has refrained from clearly stating which side it supports in the struggle over the future of Syria. This vague position has been interpreted as indicating that Israel prefers the continued rule of a weakened Assad regime—"the devil we know"—over the rule of other elements, which from its perspective could turn out to be more radical and challenging. Israel's vagueness regarding its preferences, in addition to its decision to refrain from actively intervening in the fighting, funding, arming, and training of the rebel groups, has constituted an obstacle in its cooperation with the Syrian opposition elements that are not affiliated with radical Islam, such as the Free Syrian Army. Consequently, the Syrian opposition groups have estimated that Israel prefers the Assad regime, which maintained calm and stability in the Golan Heights for decades. This assessment did not change despite the increasing reports of Israeli airstrikes against Syrian military targets, primarily in response to stray fire into the Israeli-controlled regions of the Golan Heights and against weapons shipments to Hezbollah. The exchange of blows between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran on Mt. Dov in the Golan Heights in January 2015 and the Israeli aid to the Syrian population of the Golan Heights in rebel-controlled territory also did not alter the Syrian opposition's view on Israel's position.

Nevertheless, during the war there were opposition factions who proposed initiatives for working with Israel, primarily out of despair with the international and regional system and due to the extreme hardships it faced. These initiatives, however, did not evolve into a concerted institutional Israeli campaign to assist the rebels, apparently because of Israel's bitter experience of intervention in the civil war in Lebanon on behalf of the Maronite community.

Another obstacle hindering the establishment of closer ties between Israel and rebel groups are Israel's definition of Syrian citizens as "citizens of an enemy state" who are prohibited from entering its territory, regardless of their political or organizational affiliation. Thus, Israel did not open its gates to Syrian refugees and has permitted the entry of Syrians only for humanitarian reasons—for medical treatment—and upon its conclusion they return to Syria. And additionally, official Syrian education and legislation, which also prohibit all contact with "the Zionist entity," have become entrenched norms whose conceptual impact has remained, even though the regime is incapable of enforcing them and in the eyes of many Syrians, the regime itself is not acceptable. Under these circumstances, many of the initiatives

for dialogue proposed by prominent activists of the Syrian opposition have proven difficult to implement, even via unofficial secondary channels. This legal-cultural situation makes it extremely difficult to initiate constructive interactions between Israel and the "positive" elements in Syria based upon the principle that a population interested in living in peace and security alongside of Israel should be provided with civilian and economic aid, on the condition that it does not allow acts of terrorism to be committed from within the areas under its control.

In addition to these limitations and obstacles, the Syrian opposition fears that the damage to its image resulting from cooperating with Israel will be greater than its potential benefit. The Assad regime will be quick to claim that such cooperation constitutes proof of the rebels' betrayal, which will be detrimental to their legitimacy in the public's eye. Israel's image may also be detrimentally affected; Arab parties in general and Syrian parties especially are likely to view Israeli aid to the rebels as a ploy to drag out the war and increase the damage it causes, which, in turn, will exacerbate the traditional hostility toward Israel.

Should a "road map" be formulated with the aim of once again transforming Syria into a functioning and stable state, it would be preferable from Israel's perspective to ensure that it includes the following elements:
1. The elimination and dismantling of the Islamic State, so that there will be no governing option attracting the disillusioned into its ranks;
2. Assad's removal from the presidency, even at the cost of leaving the regime in Alawite hands;
3. The ejection of Iran and its proxies from Syria in general, and southern Syria in particular and a reduction of their influence on the shaping of the Syrian state;
4. Increased coordination between the United States and Russia, regarding the desired for political and stable solution in Syria and reducing the negative influence of regional actors, especially Iran and Turkey;
5. Creation of a situation in which Syria ceases to be a battlefield between Sunnis and Shiites. For this to occur, it will be necessary first and foremost to reduce Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and especially Iran's negative influence over Syria;
6. The conclusion of an agreement among all relevant internal and external parties regarding how to purge Syria of all the groups drawing it into violence and into dangerous splits, particularly the Salafi-Jihadist groups;

7. The rehabilitation and rebuilding of the economy and infrastructure that were destroyed during the war, primarily through the repatriation of the Syrian middle class, which fled the country and is critical to the rebuilding effort.

Hard Power Versus Soft Power

To promote its goals and expand its influence over the shaping of the future Syria, Israel has three components of power at its disposal: the establishment of cooperative efforts with internal and external parties operating in Syria; the use of hard power, based largely on Israel's military might and ability to cause heavy damage to its adversaries; and the use of soft power, meaning the effective use of economic, civic, humanitarian, legal, and other tools.

Israel's ability to employ hard power could enable it to deter Assad's forces and Salafi-Jihadist elements. Soft power, despite its quite limited strength, may serve Israel primarily by enabling it to strengthen "positive" elements and create enclaves of stability alongside the border in the Golan Heights.

Hard Power

Israel's toolbox contains a number of military modes of operation for deterring violent non-state actors, most prominently the Salafi-Jihadist forces, but also the Assad regime, Iran, and Hezbollah.

1. *Direct military action against military targets*, such as commanders, army camps, combat units, weapon stockpiles, production infrastructure, and weapon shipments. Such measures detract from the attacked force's ability to inflict damage on Israel and to fight other adversaries in Syria;

2. *Action against advanced weaponry stockpiles* of the Syrian army when it appears increasingly likely that they will fall into the hands of radical factions or to be handed over to Hezbollah and Shiite militias;

3. *Tipping the military balance of power* in the fighting in southern Syria to the detriment of forces hostile to Israel. This can be achieved by supplying arms, equipment, intelligence, and other various resources to the adversaries of Israel's enemies;

4. *The declaration of a no-fly zone* in the Golan Heights and southern Syria and the threat of intercepting any aircraft of the Assad regime that violates it;

5. *Prevention of the deployment of forces of the Iranian proxies* in the Golan Heights in accordance with the red lines formulated by Israel; interception and destruction of the terrorism infrastructures against Israel;

6. *Cooperation with Jordan in establishing a special security zone in southern Syria and the Golan Heights*. This area will be defended by local forces and will be administered according to the following principles: displaced persons and refugees who fled the area will be able to return to it, whereas Salafi-Jihadist elements and pro-Iranian forces will be denied entry. To impose these prohibitions and to deter negative elements from violating them, Israel will demonstrate a readiness and willingness to use air and ground power (special forces) but will refrain from establishing a regular presence across the border. Israel should coordinate the division of the necessary responsibilities and undertakings with Jordan and establish a presence in the Jordanian-American command operations center in southern Syria;

7. *Additional tools at Israel's disposal:*

8. a) Direct military damage to the infrastructure and the economic interests of hostile elements, which would detract from their ability to mobilize the resources needed to solidify their control in areas under their influence. This would also strengthen the feeling among the local population that these factions have lost their legitimacy to be a governing alternative; b) Impairing the channels of aid and support supplied by patron states to the radical elements operating in Syria and Lebanon, which could direct their power against Israel; c) Cooperation in cyber and information warfare against the radical axis and its allies. Despite the strong deterrence that the abovementioned military maneuvers are supposed to create vis-à-vis violent elements, their effectiveness in strengthening other more "positive" factions or promoting their agendas on the ground is expected to be marginal as long as it is not accompanied and backed by a broad and supportive international framework.

Soft Power

Israel also possesses the potential ability to actively shape the processes in Syria and to promote its interests via new elements in the country using soft power, such as political, diplomatic, media, economic, legal, and humanitarian tools: [29]

1. *Cooperative efforts to restrain extremist elements.* As Israel has no levers of direct diplomatic influence over most of the violent and hostile non-state elements operating in Syria, deterring them and setting red lines to limit their conduct may be carried out through third parties, such as patron states and "positive" parties in the arena. For example, the Free Syrian Army and local groups in southern Syria may serve as mediating, organizing, and buffering forces between Israel and the Jihadist forces. In addition, Israel can conduct a dialogue with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to motivate them to encourage radical Sunnis to refrain from taking action against Israel.

2. *The use of an economic toolbox.* The economy is a lever of influence of the utmost importance. The collapse of the Syrian economy during the civil war resulted in severe material suffering and difficult living conditions. Approximately two-thirds of Syria's pre-war population needs humanitarian aid,[30] and—as already noted—the Assad regime made extensive use of sieges, the systematic destruction of infrastructure, and starvation for imposing the terms of surrender, which they have referred to as "reconciliation arrangements." Given this reality, economic considerations have become the foremost criterion in determining allegiance and organizational affiliation, deciding to join or disengage from other elements, and to move from one group to another. The depressed economic situation has also hurt the ability of the Assad regime to preserve its loyal public bases which it did by channeling funds to pay compensation to the families of the dead, to import gasoline, and to maintain the electricity and water infrastructure.[31] The international community, including Israel, has an interest in economically strengthening the pragmatic rebel groups (as opposed to extreme groups such as IS) so that they can provide the population with essential services.

3. *The establishment of safe zones*. The effort to establish safe zones should be expanded so that they will provide an answer to the economic needs of the population, in addition to the security arrangements to be implemented within these areas (the protection of the population by local forces who enjoy the deterrent backup of neighboring states and powers). These zones should enjoy an international umbrella of protection and support and will be areas in which economic, civil, and social infrastructure can be rebuilt and moderate local government can be established. They will also play three significant roles: 1) to serve as a magnet for displaced

persons and refugees; 2) to prevent the mobilization toward radical Islamist groups for material reasons; and 3) to serve as a constructive model for additional areas in Syria.

4. *The creation of an economic border in the Golan Heights* that will include trade routes between Israel and southern Syria.[32] These routes will facilitate the import and export of services and goods, including agricultural products, as well as the import of manpower. This will improve the economic and humanitarian situation in southern Lebanon and expand the shared interests between Israel and local Syrian elements in the Golan Heights especially and southern Syria in general. If suitable conditions evolve, Israel will also be able to derive long-term benefit from the border economy by engaging in cooperative efforts with the Syrian side of the border in the fields of infrastructure, economy, trade, agriculture, and technology.

5. *Initiating an international effort to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime and on its economic patrons*, thereby transforming its economic weakness into another lever for forcing an agreed upon political settlement. The general components of such a settlement will be the end of the bloodbath and the formulation of political reforms, including the strengthening of functioning local communities and the establishment of a federative regime. The lifting of sanctions against Iran following the signing of the nuclear agreement has made it easier for Iran to allocate increased resources to the Assad regime and Hezbollah for strengthening its allies and reestablishing its regional influence. Therefore, the international community in general and the Western powers in particular need to formulate new resolutions to stop Tehran's negative economic activities in areas that are unrelated to the nuclear realm.

6. *The provision of humanitarian aid.* Although soft levers are usually considered to have limited influence, Israel's humanitarian aid to Syria has been extremely effective, as it provides Israel with significant return (in comparison to the controlled risks involved) and can be pursued without deviating from the borders of its sovereignty and without explicitly affiliating itself with one of the sides in the conflict. Israeli humanitarian aid is meant to provide a solution to a wide variety of challenges, including the mortal danger faced by civilians in the battle zones, poor living conditions (for example, the shortage of shelters during difficult winters), and the collapse of the healthcare and education systems. In

practice, the provision of aid requires overcoming many difficulties, such as Israel's problems cooperating with its Syrian neighbors; the insufficient scope of available aid; and the difficulty of dividing up the aid fairly and impartially, without strengthening negative elements and not allowing militias to exploit it in a contemptible and corrupt manner for the sake of economic profit.[33]

7. *An upgrade of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)*. The UN observer force in the Golan Heights, which was established in 1974 to supervise the disengagement-of-forces agreements between Israel and Syria at the end of the Yom Kippur War, continues to operate according to its original mandate. However, its geographical deployment was dramatically reduced when it withdrew from most of its positions after the rebels seized them. Israel must strive to update the mission of the UNDOF to suit the new reality in Syria and Israel's security needs in the Syrian Golan Heights. In this framework, Israel needs to demand that the UN positions in Syria be reoccupied, as these positions will ensure the wellbeing of UN soldiers and at the same time allow them to fulfill a variety of tasks, such as providing civilian aid to local communities in the Golan Heights; coordinating the activity of international relief agencies; maintaining contact with the active forces on the ground; and supervising military activity in the security zone in the Golan Heights and the entry of parties under the auspices of the Assad regime and its supporters.

8. *The strengthening of "positive" forces*. The diplomatic levers of influence that Israel can apply to moderate Syrian factions are not particularly well developed. Although an Israeli declaration identifying the "positive" forces would mean formally choosing a side, it would not be considered a deviation from the international consensus as long as Israel bases its action on the protection of human rights and the promotion of freedom and democratization. Therefore, even if such a declaration does not immediately transform Syrian public opinion toward Israel, its benefit is likely to be greater than the damage caused by Israel's policy of vagueness—especially if such a declaration remains on the moral and symbolic level and does not receive visible operational military expression on the ground.

Establishing Cooperative Initiatives

For the purpose of intensifying and expanding the realm of Israeli influence in southern Syria in general and the Golan Heights in particular, Israel is well advised to plan a joint strategy to this effect with Jordan, with American backing. Within this framework, an effort should be made to coordinate with "positive" (or less negative) actors, such as the Free Syrian Army, local communities, organizations that are not affiliated with Salafi-Jihadist groups, and minority groups such as the Druze. Partnership with these parties, even if limited in nature, can be based on delivering financial, military, and humanitarian aid (primarily, the provision of essential needs to the local population).

To identify the local parties with which a tendency toward cooperation with Israel can be cultivated, four primary variables need to be considered:

1. Their influence on the ongoing preservation of calm along the Israeli-Syrian border, and their ability to prevent the establishment of Jihadist terrorist groups and action on their part against Israel from within the areas under their control;

2. Their ability to represent broad, entrenched coalitions (regional, sectarian or political) that are likely to play a role in the future shaping of Syria (or at least part of it) at the end of the war;

3. Their ties to the local population, their commitment to its needs, the support they enjoy among the local population, and the legitimacy they enjoy among the public within the area under their control. These are all factors that will increase the influence of these parties on their immediate and more distant surroundings;

4. Their ability to influence other groups that are ideologically distant from Israel, including the Salafi-Jihadist organizations.

When Israel assesses the parties with which it should cooperate, it must take into consideration both the party's willingness to establish relations with Israel and the potential benefit that such relations stand to offer. The following variables are likely to indicate a positive approach toward Israel among the parties operating in Syria:

1. An approach that places unique group interests before all-Arab and all-Islamic interests regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the willingness that currently exists among elements in Syria to cooperate with Israel is influenced by their geographical proximity to the border, it should not be taken for granted and can shift for various reasons, such

as changing needs, Israel's response to the initiatives of these elements, and the existence of alternatives;

2. Relations of proximity with Arab and Western states who share Israel's strategic interest of halting the spread of Iranian-Shiite influence in the region;

3. Understanding the potential benefits of access to humanitarian, civil, and other aid at the border with Israel, given the strategy of siege, starvation, and submission employed by the Assad regime;

4. Israel's capacity as a deterring force. The fact that Israel has succeeded in deterring most of the parties involved in Syria has motivated at least some of them to avoid clashes with Israel and, in some cases, even to make use of its assistance. Even radical elements with significant religious and ideological antagonism toward Israel—such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the al-Qaeda branch operating in southern Syria and the Golan Heights) and the IS branch (Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid) operating at the tripartite Israeli-Syrian-Jordanian border—typically have refrained from actions that openly challenge Israel and appear to be willing to establish rules of the game with Israel, based on indirect coordination mechanisms or understandings;

5. A pro-Western worldview that maintains that relations with Israel is an important condition for mobilizing the international community—led by the United States—in the struggle to topple the Assad regime and to rebuild Syria as a democratic, progressive, and secure state.

Israel regards the factions that can possibly contribute to routine border security and that represent large, deeply rooted groups—which enjoy widespread legitimacy and assumingly will play a role on the day after the war—as the most attractive candidates for cooperative efforts. Elements that have little influence over the current reality but that are likely to play a key role in the future should also be considered.

Thus, the reality that has evolved in Syria since 2011 continues to present Israel with unique opportunities to forge ties and initiate cooperative efforts with elements who have a more positive attitude toward it. They include the local communities in southern Syria, local units affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Coalition, certain minority groups—particularly the Kurdish and Druze minorities—and independent parties that are all associated with the pragmatic Sunni camp. These groups, despite their rather limited political influence and military strength, still represent

geographical and sectoral interests that are not expected to vanish from the political map. What is more, they share common enemies with Israel, namely Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime on the one hand and IS, al-Qaeda, and other Salafi-Jihadist elements on the other hand. Relations with these relatively pragmatic elements could provide Israel with a platform for ad-hoc cooperative efforts to achieve immediate and tactical, focused goals such as creating a stabilizing influence in the Golan Heights for maintaining the peace and security, as well as cooperation in the intelligence and civilian spheres. In addition, ties established in the present could prepare the ground for future relations between Israel and entities that will be established in Syria on the day after the civil war.

It is important that the Druze, both on Jabal al-Druze and on the Syrian region of the Hermon, will be part of the group of parties working in cooperation with Israel and Jordan (although such cooperation runs counter to the principle of allegiance to the regime that has guided the Druze for generations). Israel and Jordan can define a protected zone to which refugees can flee and where they can receive humanitarian aid. In this manner, Israel can also demonstrate its commitment to the Hashemite regime in Jordan and to the Druze community in Israel. As more protected zones are established, and the local population is able to live securely, the more likely the repatriation of refugees and displaced persons will be increased to those areas. This, in turn, is expected to make it easier for Jordan, which absorbed almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees and currently bears the enormous burden of caring for them.

In the civil war in Syria and other clashes in the Middle East, the different parties involved typically operate according to local tactical considerations that are not always consistent with their ideology. Therefore, short-term tactical cooperative efforts in the military and security realm with such elements offer Israel more than just strategic cooperative undertakings with them. The conditions required for establishing tactical cooperative undertakings are usually the existence of common enemies, overlapping situational interests, and the need to bridge between needs and resources. In order to execute these cooperative efforts, it is typically necessary to keep relations secretive. Each side also needs to be able to come together against a common enemy (for example, the Shiite militias and Hezbollah). Such tactical ties require relatively little investment from Israel and Syrian factions at a given point in time. They do not require them to directly

address ideological, emotional, or ethical reservations, and they can usually be advanced bilaterally, without the intensive involvement of a third party. Indeed, ad-hoc cooperative efforts aimed at providing a specific and direct solution to immediate security, civilian, and humanitarian needs are underway between Israel and pragmatic elements operating in southern Syria, including the Free Syrian Army, local communities and forces in the Syrian Golan Heights, and even Jihadist forces, all who regard Israel as an enemy—but not one that should be given top priority to fight.

The Syrian crisis has created opportunities for cooperative undertakings not only with non-state elements but also with the patron states that support these non-state actors. Israel and the Sunni Arab countries—particularly Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States—have overlapping interests resulting from their shared fear of possible Iranian domination in Syria and the establishment of a Shiite-Iranian land corridor from Tehran, via Baghdad and Damascus, to Beirut. Therefore, Israel can view its shared interests with the Sunni Arab states in the Syrian context as a lever for the establishment of stronger relations over time, which could also include their involvement in seeking a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Conclusions

Settlement or Continued Fighting—Are the Conditions Ripe for an End to the War?

Alongside those encouraging the continuation of hostilities, several developments that occurred since late 2016 and throughout 2017 may mark a turning point toward a decisive military outcome or a resolution of the crisis. They include:

1. The conquest of Aleppo by the Assad regime, which took all the cards from the rebels and constituted a serious blow to the morale of those who had hoped that the United States, the Gulf States, and Turkey would be willing to come to their aid to counterbalance Russian and Iranian support of Assad's regime. Additionally, in the fall of 2017, al-Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State, was reconquered.

2. The demonstration of a genuine interest by both the United States and Russia in achieving a situation in which they no longer need to be involved in the fighting in Syria, which has exhausted significant resources. In the short time, however, it seems that neither Russia nor the United States will end their involvement as long as they have not yet achieved the goals they set for themselves: preservation and solidification of the Assad regime (the aim of Russia) and the eradication of the Islamic State (the aim of the United States).

3. During the initial period following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, closer Russian-American relations were expected, which could have resulted in an agreement between the superpowers over a framework for a settlement in Syria. However, several events at the beginning of 2017, among them Assad's use of chemical weapons causing the American response to intensify and the alleged

discovery of ties between Trump and Putin, make it hard to estimate the extent to which the United States and Russia will cooperate in the Syrian arena. Nonetheless, they are already succeeding in maintaining the security and political coordination essential to any attempt to end the fighting in Syria. One of the prominent joint measures is the conclusion of a ceasefire for southern Syria, which went into effect in July 2017 following an American-Russian-Jordanian agreement and, at the time of writing, is still holding.

4. Saudi Arabia, which was the primary financial supporter of the rebel forces, has been pushed onto the sidelines by the Turkish-Russian-American coordination over ceasefires and the establishment of de-escalation zones and areas of influence. Saudi Arabia has had trouble maintaining its operative support of the rebels and achieving regional and international legitimacy for continuing the hostilities. The decline in oil prices, in addition to Riyadh's war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen—so far without results—has not eased Saudi Arabia's freedom of action.

5. The ability of the "legitimate" Syrian opposition to continue fighting is almost completely dependent on external forces. The weakening of its international and regional supporters necessitates that it should reassess its strategy in the struggle against the regime, or, alternatively, its terms for a settlement. One of the major reasons for the reduction in external support of the opposition parties has been the fact that the opposition remains split and divided. As a result of the growing gap between the formal goals of the Syrian opposition and its ability to work to realize these goals on the ground, it has no choice but to think about a new plan—whether or not it intends on continuing to fight. An important development in this context, dating to July 2017, is Trump's decision to freeze a CIA program for training and arming Sunni rebels against the Assad regime.

6. The Kurds have become a major force in the coalition that aims to eradicate and dismantle the Islamic State. As a result, they enjoy an umbrella of American protection as long as the fighting against IS continues. Nonetheless, since 2016, the Kurds have been subjected to pressure by the Turkish army, which is attempting to push them onto the other side of the Euphrates River into the Sunni populated areas. The Kurds can therefore be expected to support a settlement that will allow them to preserve their territorial achievements. Moreover, their dependence on

the support of external forces and the agreements of the Assad regime and its allies are likely to encourage them to fall into line with any settlement that provides even just a partial solution to its aspirations for autonomy.

7. A Russian initiative introduced in May 2017 to formulate the "Memorandum on the Creation of De-Escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic," which Russia signed with Iran and Turkey, was intended to achieve a sustainable ceasefire in Syria and to lay the foundations for an overall solution to the crisis when the fighting ends. The memorandum's principles include preserving the unity of Syria and laying the groundwork for a federative state structure, according to Russia's interpretation.

These developments and the changing considerations of all the parties involved in the fighting in Syria—local, regional, and international actors alike—may be indicative of a gradual shift from a hybrid political situation to a federative political order in Syria. If, following the defeat of IS in eastern Syria, it is still not possible to reach a settlement in which Syria remains united, Russia—whether independently or in agreement with the United States—is liable to advance a proposal for the establishment of a new order in Syria, consisting of autonomy for the Sunni and Kurdish populations and lip-service to the idea of a united state controlled by an Alawite central regime. The assessment prevailing in Moscow is that even such a solution would protect its interests in Syria specifically and in the region in general. It must be assumed that instead of continuing to wallow in the Syrian swamp, Russia, and possibly also Iran, would prefer to focus on rebuilding a defensive apparatus for the Alawite regime and on maintaining the lines that have taken shape during the war so far.

The United States is interested in finishing the war and in bringing an end to the regional instability that it has caused. Therefore, it will likely support a scenario expected to lead to stability and an end to the violence, even if it involves only partial political separation between the fighting forces. Separation between the different groups will create a new reality of relatively homogenous entities in which the ruling group enjoys a degree of sovereignty, whether with the consent of the central government or contrary to its wishes. Such a situation is likely to reduce the risk of war among the new entities that come into existence. Nonetheless, even a solution along these lines will not eliminate completely the risk of future conflict and confrontation between the entities that will be created, or between them and the central regime.

The regional powers oppose the disintegration of Syria, and major efforts will be required to convince them to agree to a federative solution. They fear setting a precedent that could be detrimental to themselves in the future. Still, the appearance of a Syria that is unified within its borders, at least on a formal level, should mitigate the opposition to a federative solution.

As for Turkey, the longer it sustains increasingly heavy blows due to its ground intervention in Syria, the more likely it will ultimately prefer Kurdish control in northern Syria—on the condition that the Kurdish region is designated as a Turkish zone of influence—rather than the continuation of hostilities.

Iran, it seems, has estimated that it will be able to ensure its fundamental interests in Syria even within the framework of a central government controlling a smaller entity, on the condition that its influence over the central regime and its direct access to Lebanon is preserved. Therefore, Iran can be expected to try to thwart any settlement that stipulates an obligation on the part of Assad (or any other Alawite ruler) to Russia at its expense. Contrary to Iran, Saudi Arabia (and perhaps also Turkey) will regard the Sunni entity as a potential means of increasing its influence in Syria, necessarily at Iran's expense.

As for the internal structure of Syria, even with a formal central government, the institutionalization of a reality of autonomy on different levels will require the demarcation of borders between the "legitimate" (again, from the perspective of western states and regional powers) elements and recognition (if only de facto) of the areas ruled by Salafi-Jihadist elements. Indeed, the most likely scenario is that of a hybrid-federative Syria. Underlying this conclusion is primarily the assessment that, in addition to the potential of a formal settlement along federative lines, there will also be enclaves of Jihadist elements that will not accept the authority of the central regime and be determined to continue fighting and to undermine stability. In addition, alongside the central regime, there will be separate Kurdish and Sunni federations, whose degree of subordination to the central regime will change periodically. These federations, in turn, will contain areas with differing features of control, such as zones of influence of the states bordering Syria and enclaves with varying levels of autonomy, as well as areas characterized by chaos and the absence of organized and effective rule. Under such conditions, it will, of course, be impossible to speak of a unified political system in Syria.

The Syrian opposition's official position, which is supported by the West, holds that the disintegration of Syria into separate sovereignties along political-sectarian lines is an unacceptable scenario. The Syrian opposition still adheres to its formulation of Syrian unity and the preservation of its institutions. In its view, this is the most practical solution to the crisis and offers the best chances of stability. Nonetheless, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the opposition's rejection of federative solutions or the division of the country will ultimately decrease, weaken, and change. Such a change could be expected especially if it ultimately becomes clear that the only unity possible in Syria is under the rule of an Alawite government. Presumably, if this occurs, the opposition will ultimately prefer federative settlements for an interim period, until it is eventually possible to achieve a union that is not under Alawite control. In any event, the possibility of achieving a federative solution is dependent on the ability of the rebel organizations from across the spectrum to engage in a discussion with one another, even with the help of a third, mediating party, and to reach agreements regarding the territorial division. The likelihood of success of such a measure depends on the military ability to bring these groups to a point where they have no choice but to accept the proposal.

At the same time, it is important to take into consideration that the international community will face difficulties in extending economic and humanitarian aid to a Syria that is subject to a hybrid political order, whether in theory or in practice. Such a split of the country may require separate and differential provision of aid to all the autonomies that are established. This would require a division of resources that is as equitable and balanced as possible and if not, the settlement is liable to collapse. The powers will also provide differential economic support to a federative settlement provided it does not run counter to their interests. Iran could be a lifeline to the Alawite entity, and Turkey could play the same role for the Sunni entity in northwestern Syria and—if it reaches the conclusion that Kurdish autonomy is the least of all evils—for the Kurdish entity as well. Alternatively, the Kurdish region in Iraq could play a role in this context. Therefore, even in the absence of a change in policy on the part of Ankara, the Kurdish autonomy could live sparingly off its oil and agricultural resources, with some degree of assistance from the autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. In the case of the Sunni entity, the situation is more complicated: Turkey and Saudi Arabia can provide it with protection, but the geographical distance between

them might make it difficult to realize. Other major issues pertain to the degree of autonomy that the different entities will receive and the nature of the relations between them and the central government.

Notwithstanding the above, focusing on the interests and the geopolitics of the state has the potential to cause the observer to overlook one simple but fundamental fact: the transitional period and the chances of Syria being rehabilitated at the end of the war will depend largely on the aspirations, desires, and political orientation of the Syrian people. International parties will obviously have a great deal of influence over shaping the developments that play out in Syria, whether by setting the terms of a political settlement or pushing for continued hostilities; however, on the ground, it will be the Syrian people who continue to bear the burden of the fighting, or, alternatively, who begin working to stabilize the communal infrastructures and the relations between the communities. From this perspective, the physical and psychological toll of the conflict on the citizens of Syria, as well as the continued dissolution of the social fabric in the country, are liable to have a profound impact on Syria's chances of recovering and achieving stability. They also reduce the already extremely slim chances of attaining economic and humanitarian improvement. In this context, it will be particularly important to pay attention to the young people of Syria, those known as the "lost generation."

The Writing on the Wall

The chances of reunifying Syria in a manner that allows it to revert to being united in the way that it was prior to the outbreak of the civil war appear to be slim. Even those who believe that this idea could be realized acknowledge that it would require an extended and complex process. Although the federative-hybrid scenario presented above is undesirable from the perspective of some of the parties involved, as it will require a change in paradigm regarding the unity of Syria, many regard it as having the best chance of success. Nonetheless, before overstating the virtues of this solution, it is important to stress the following: the existence of a weak central government alongside separate entities in Syria will neither solve the disagreements that exist nor mitigate the hostility between the different entities in the arena. Moreover, the danger of conflagration will remain, as the various entities will almost certainly want to deepen their autonomy and perhaps also expand the realms they control. Still, after years of war

and overall exhaustion, all, or at least most parties may ultimately reach the conclusion that the federative structure is the preferable interim solution for mitigating the violence and creating an opportunity for recovery. And if it is successful, as in many other cases in the past, the temporary is likely to become permanent.

Israel possesses the capacity to influence the reshaping of Syria, whether using hard power (military action) or soft power (political, diplomatic, media-oriented, economic, legal, and humanitarian tools). Evidence that Israel needs to be more involved in the shaping of Syria's future emerged in May 2017, following a Russian-formulated agreement for the establishment of de-escalation zones. Notably, only after combined Jordanian-American-Israeli pressure did Russia introduce changes to the agreement so that it also considered the interests of Israel and Jordan. This is yet another indication that Israel needs to adopt a more proactive and resolute policy in order to defend its critical interests in Syria.

As additional de-escalation agreements are likely to be signed in the future, Israel must sharpen its red lines first and foremost by thwarting the establishment of Shiite forces (the Iranian military, Hezbollah, and the Shiite militias) in southwestern Syria in general and in the Golan Heights in particular and by preventing the use of Syrian territory for the transport of weapons to Hezbollah. Israel should demand that just as Turkey is party to agreements regarding northern Syria, Israel—as well as Jordan—must be party to agreements pertaining to southern Syria. It is recommended that Israel plan a joint strategy with Jordan—with American backing—to establish a joint zone of influence in southern Syria and to strive for coordination with "positive" elements, such as the Free Syrian Army, local communities, pragmatic Islamic groups, and also minority groups such as the Druze. Israel and Jordan possess air capabilities and advanced counter capabilities that could enable them to establish a no-fly zone in defined areas and provide parties that cooperate with them with counter defense, with the use of ground forces only in raids and special operations. Such activity will strengthen the strategic alliance between Jordan and Israel, halt the expanding influence of Iran, Hezbollah, and Salafi-Jihadist elements, and prevent the creation of a vacuum that is liable to be penetrated by negative elements such as IS.

An analysis of the reality in Syria indicates that the federative-hybrid solution is the most feasible. The main reason is that despite the potential for the existence of central rule, Syria will not revert to a homogenous unit with

a legitimate and effective central government whose authority is enforced through the state's entire territory. In practice, it can be expected that Syria will be ruled by different centers of power—Sunni and Kurdish enclaves alongside more chaotic areas with lower levels of governance—characterized by differing relations with the central regime, ranging from competition to cooperation. As Israel's security interests are directly affected by the events in this arena, it must find feasible and diverse channels of influence that will provide an effective response to this complicated system that does not have a single responsible party but is still referred to as "Syria."

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During the civil war in Syria, the functioning of the country's state system was fundamentally undermined, and essential questions have been raised regarding the shaping of a future state order in its territory and the implications of the trends evolving in this arena for Israeli national security. This memorandum offers answers to these questions.

It can be assumed that the state's framework and a central government will be preserved in Syria, due to the large number of parties having an interest in this, including Russia, the United States, the countries of the Middle East, and the majority of the local population. Nonetheless, the internal Syrian system is likely to be left with "hybrid" features, since years of war and the crystallization of different competing forces in this divided country will make it difficult for the central government to achieve broad legitimacy and institutionalize effective governance throughout all its territory. Therefore, it is expected that different forces in Syria—some in sectarian and ethnic enclaves (Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish), and others in chaotic regions with an active Jihadist presence—will continue to take form and operate. It has been estimated that the relations between enclaves will be characterized by competition—sometimes hostile and at other times cooperative—between them and the formal government. With the passage of time, Syria may undergo a transition from a hybrid situation to a federative order and then to an increasingly strong central government, under the condition that it allows the political participation of the population.

Israel needs to develop responses to the many challenges it faces in the Syrian arena, especially given the accelerated establishment of Shiite militias and Iranian dominance on the ground. It needs to pursue understandings and operational coordination with Russia; maintain strategic coordination with the United States over the future of Syria, and increasingly engage the United States in the settlement process there that goes beyond simply the dismantling of the Islamic State; formulate a joint strategy with Jordan, with American backing, to establish a joint zone of influence in southern Syria; and expand the aid it provides and its relations with Syrian communities in the Golan Heights in order to ensure a buffer zone between Israel and hostile elements and a basis for islands of stability in this complex arena. At the same time, Israel will, from time to time, need to use military force to prevent the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah and the military solidification of Iran and its proxies in the Syrian-Lebanese region.

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