



**Research Paper**

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**ADDRESSING THE SYRIAN CRISIS STALEMATE  
HOW WILL IT END?**

**Randolph Cobankiat**

**(Security Analyst, Institute of International Management,  
National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan)**

**RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN STUDIES  
(RIEAS)**

**# 1, Kalavryton Street, Alimos, Athens, 17456, Greece  
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## **RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN STUDIES (RIEAS)**

**# 1, Kalavryton Street, Alimos, Athens, 17456, Greece**

**Tel/Fax: + 30 210 9911214, E-mail: [rieasinfo@gmail.com](mailto:rieasinfo@gmail.com)**

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**Middle East Tensions and the Spark of a Revolution**

***From Tunisia, to Egypt to the Middle East***

On December 17, 2010, 26 year old Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed university graduate struggling to support his family by selling fruit, set himself on fire after Tunisian police confiscated his fruit cart due to his failure to present a vendor's permit. (AhramOnline). Even before his death 3 weeks later, a huge unrest erupted in Tunisia which eventually led to Tunisian President Ben Ali and his family fleeing after nearly 23 years in power (IrishTimes.com). This would be but a beginning that would shake the foundation of regimes in the Middle East – a revolution of what would be known as the Arab Spring.

Soon after the exile of Ben Ali, protesters in Tahrir Square, Egypt started to take to the streets to protest to demand President Hosni Mubarak's resignation. Despite Mubarak's close ties with the Western Powers and even Israel (who watched in worry what a Post-Mubarak may spell for the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt) (Rudoren), his allies could do little to stem the growing dissent among Egyptians, who wanted his 30 years of power to come to an end. With international media and the whole world monitoring his actions, Mubarak opted for concessions such as choosing not to run for the next term, ceding control to his vice-president (while he remained

president) – all which resulted in vain. In just 18 days, Hosni Mubarak’s reign and power ended (Peterson).

Mubarak’s end would send shockwaves among the other Middle Eastern leaders who would implement various strategies to prevent such a revolution from spreading; similar to stopping a sickness before it became cancerous. While countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain prevented a revolution through tightened security and providing various economic and political concessions, countries like Libya and Syria broke out in an all out civil war.

### ***Gaddafi’s Struggle and Fall***

Both Libya’s Moammar Gaddafi and Syria’s Bashar Al-Assad chose to respond with brute military force. Gaddafi labelled the protesters as “rats and cockroaches”, “drug addicts”, “sick people” (PressTV) and even coiled the protests against his rule as “a terrorist plot.” (HeraldSun). Within a month of February since the uprising calling for his resignation began, the Gaddafi regime has killed over 1,400 protesters (PressTV). When the Gaddafi regime ordered airstrikes on the mass protests, it triggered two things: first was the defection of several of Colonel Gaddafi officials (including but not limited to military officials, Libyan ambassadors stationed in various countries, military men and cabinet officials) and the second was a growing concern on the international community on pressing for immediate action to stop the growing civilian casualties in Libya.

Gaddafi’s regime did what they could to regain power. Several witnesses claim that Gaddafi recruited African mercenaries to bolster his armies and fight the opposition (Al-Arabiya-News); attempted to shut off electricity, internet services and block websites that may threaten the Gaddafi regime (even before the civil war broke out) (Tsotsis); he also sent its full military might (tanks, artillery and air planes) to take back cities that have fallen to the opposition and received cheers of support from Pro-Gaddafi citizens. Under all that however, Gaddafi was faced with a recently organized rebel transitional council stationed in Benghazi while billions of Gaddafi’s global assets and bank

accounts were frozen from countries like the United States, UK, Australia, Switzerland and Germany (AlJazeera).

Just when Gaddafi's forces were about to attack Benghazi, which was the last main opposition held city and headquarters to the National Transitional Council, the United Nations passed a resolution imposing a no-fly-zone and authorized the use of force to protect civilians, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace and Acts of Aggression) (UN). This resolution was made possible when the UN vote resulted in a 10-0 vote in favour with 5 abstains (2 from Russia and China) (UN News). With this, air strikes and opposition support came from France, United States and UK. Gaddafi eventually retreated to Sirte (Gaddafi's hometown) when the Libyan Capital of Tripoli fell, and was eventually caught and killed a few hours later by rebel hands.

### **Assad's Syria and the UN Peace Process**

The same result however did not befall Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, who as of August 2012 (almost 10 months after Gaddafi's death), is still fighting opposition forces (demonstrating almost the same if not greater brutality than the Gaddafi regime). In fact, according to the National Post, Gaddafi's death, rather than shake Assad's willpower only strengthened it even more in his bid to crush all opposition. (Nakhoul). Furthermore, the month of July 2012 marked the third consecutive time that the United Nations Security Council is unable to provide any military action and economic sanctions due to the veto of Russia and China. Opposition forces there have been getting little or no support from the outside. Although the war has escalated, it seems that Assad still has a considerable grip on Syria.

As of now, the best chance of ever ending the bloody conflict in Syria may seem to lie in the efforts of Kofi Annan as the UN Peace Envoy to Syria. Kofi Annan is UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's successor who was appointed by Ban Ki-moon himself as well as Arab League Chief Nabil Elaraby on February 23, 2012 (UN News) – just a few days after China and Russia vetoed against the United Nations General Assembly Resolution calling for Bashar Al-Assad to resign. There is promise here in the



main fact that Russia itself assured the public that it would do what it could to support Kofi Annan and the peace process in Syria (ZeeNews). China also expressed support for Kofi Annan and his peace plans. China's foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei mentioned that China supported Kofi Annan's mediation efforts and hope that there would be a political resolution in Syria soon. (BBC News).

However, on August 2, 2012, it would seem that the Kofi Annan peace process ended in failure as Kofi Annan announced his resignation as the UN-Arab Peace Envoy. According to Kofi Annan, although all parties seemed to have showed support for the peace plan, there was hardly any progress made in the 17 months since he become the UN-Arab Peace envoy to Syria, citing "finger pointing" and "name calling" within the security council. It is also during this critical time that forces loyal to Bashar Al-Assad are pounding the city of Aleppo (after claiming to have driven the rebel forces from Damascus), the most populous city in Syria as tens of people die every day as the peace process is further delayed. Since the uprising began, it is estimated that as of the end of July, over 18,000 Syrian lives have been lost (mostly unarmed civilians) in the civil war between the pro and anti Assad forces (Moody).

This research paper seeks to analyze the roots of the Assad Regime as well as their international relations with vital countries which could make or break the Assad Regime, such as the 5 permanent security members of the United Nations (United States, UK, France, China and Russia) as well as Iran and Hezbollah. Through this, we hope to provide possible leads and assumptions to Syria's future and the fate of the Assad Regime.

## **Syria and the Assad Regime**

### ***The Assad family: Since 1970***

The Assad family has wielded power in Syria since 1970, when Bashar Al-Assad's father, Hafez Al-Assad became president. During all that time, Hafez initially wanted the eldest son, Bassel Al Assad to be groomed as the future president (never declaring his intent to the public) but when Bassel died in an automobile accident, Bashar, who at fulfilling his medical profession as a doctor, was recalled back into the

Syrian army (Zisser). He would eventually succeed his father (who died in the 2000) and become president.

It is important to note that for Assad to be in his shoes right now, he must possess a strong character as a President to have held out in the face of a growing opposition. His father used his remaining years before his death to groom Bashar to be the next president in terms of acquiring the military's support when he eventually grew in ranks to become colonel in 1999 (after having entered the military in 1994). (Zisser) In fact, sources even say that to make sure that top military officials would remain loyal to him, old military officials were made to retire and replaced with a new generation of military officers which swore loyalty to Bashar Al-Assad (Ma'oz Gian & Winckler).

He also slowly removed the political influence of his potential rivals for the presidency through his political powers. Just like his father before him, Assad was elected as president in the year 2000 and re-elected in 2007 in which he faced various oppositions on the way (such as opposition boycotts), but nevertheless his power as Syria's president remained. (Britannica). Bashar Al-Assad has been a long time hardliner known to have imprisoned political rivals and pro-reform activists (a move that the Assad regime denies doing), which goes to show that his desire to hold on to power has been well planned out even before he succeeded his father. We can also see that the support the military has for Assad is considerably strong since many of the top military officials have been assigned by Assad as his close allies ever since he held the presidency.

### **Syria and its International Relations**

While Syria continuous to encounter a growing isolation especially from Western countries and their allies, they still have close allies and supporters, such as an equally isolated Iran and Hezbollah, a group regarded by Israel and the United States as a terrorist organization (Malla). This is one of the biggest (if not biggest) reasons why Syria and the United States (as well as staunch allies of the United States like Israel and UK) are in such negative terms. For the United States, supporting Hezbollah is equivalent to supporting terrorism. Therefore, Syria is a supporter of terrorism. In fact,

former president George Bush coiled Syria, along with North Korea and Iran as the Axis of Evil (Ansari).

### *Syria and the 5 Permanent Members of the United Nations*

#### ***Syria and the United States***

Ever since Bashar succeeded his father he has directly opposed United States through his words and actions, something his father would not dare. Such an example would be the war in Iraq when Bashar indirectly aided Saddam's armies against the US-UK coalition (despite knowing that the US led coalition would have a greater probability of winning the war). Assad's reasons for his actions on Iraq are debatable yet according to Syria's actions come not as a surprise as Syria would have preferred Saddam as its neighbour rather than a government which is backed by the United States. (Zisser.) On the other hand a top US general George Casey Jr. accused Syria of supporting and harbouring Iraqi insurgents that stage bombings and attacks on US forces (Ricks). Syria information minister Mohsen Bilal on the other hand, condemned the US-Iraq Pact because it "rewards the US occupation of Iraq" as thousands of Iraqi refugees in Syria protest against the US pact. (AFP). This is just one example on how tense US-Syria relations are.

One critical turning point came on February 14, 2005 when former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri (who was against Syria's involvement in Lebanon) was assassinated. At that time US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice accused Syria (Assad Regime) and Pro-Syrian Lebanese officials of masterminding the attack. With this, the United States immediately pulled out its ambassador to Syria Margaret Scobey and threatened to place international pressure and sanctions on Syria should Syria refuse to withdraw the 15,000 Syrian troops left in Lebanon after the civil war in Lebanon ended. Though Assad (who denied the accusations) eventually bowed down to pressure and withdrew the Syrian troops from Lebanon, distrust and animosity remained. (Nwazota)

It was only in the year 2011 that Robert Ford was appointed ambassador to Syria as tensions seemed to cool down a bit. However, in the wake the of Arab Spring

uprising on Syria, Robert Ford continuously encouraged the protestors and Syrians to rally behind the opposition (visiting areas in which large demonstrations took place along with the French ambassador despite increasing violence). He was once again withdrawn on October 2011 when threats against him grew and travel restrictions were starting to be implemented by the Assad Regime. For him, political transition in Syria led by the Syrian people who are supported by the international community would be Syria's best chance of starting anew as a beacon of democracy (The Daily Star).

President Obama has implemented several executive orders against Assad and his aides. According to the Human Rights First timeline, On April 2012, he implemented executive order 13572, which mainly freezes all US assets of Syrian officials and the Assad family who are involved (or suspected to be involved) in human rights abuses in Syria. On May 2012, another executive order, 13573 was implemented which freezes properties and also agencies or institutions controlled by the Syrian government and executive order 13582 which prevents any form of investment from Syria, donations to the people blocked by the executive order and the importation of petroleum from Syria. Up to this point, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has always emphasized that there is no more room for Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Syria in the negotiating table.

### ***Syria and the UK***

Before I get started with this, it is important to note that the UK and United States have always been major allies especially in the fight against terrorism such as Al Qaeda. During Israel's war with Arab nations, Israel's staunch supporters were the United States and the United Kingdom. During the US war on Iraq during the presidency of President George Bush (Jr.), British Prime Minister at that time, Tony Blair dispatched nearly 46,000 British troops (at its peak) to aid the United States in their assault on Baghdad which fell to 4,100 on May 2009 when UK decided to formally withdraw (BBC News, Iraq War in Figures). In fact, when Gordon Brown (who is not fond of Bush) replaced Tony Blair as UK Prime Minister, there was a downturn in relations between US and UK but nevertheless, it was possible that the UK at that time remained Pro-American despite being Anti-Bush. This may show us that the US and UK share a special bond in international relations where in David Dunn coins it "dual interregnum" –

incumbent rulers in their respective states simply waiting for the terms of the other to end before improving relations again (Dunn). It is my belief that UK will continue to support many US international policies especially when concerning issues such as human rights abuses and terrorism.

Despite this, the UK and Syrian relations prior to the Arab Spring seemed to have been steadily smooth since both countries re-established diplomatic relations in 1991, When British Ambassador to Syria Simon Collis was interviewed by Syria Today, he described the relationship as “smooth with no bilateral problem” but also “thin” and “lacking opportunities to deepen the relationship further.” He also described the student exchanges and also the increase in British tourists in Syria (Haidar).

Fawaz Akhras also played an important role in improving Syrian-UK relations. His daughter, Asma, is the husband of Bashar Al-Assad (thus Assad’s father-in-law.) He founded the British Syrian Society where he would arrange business conferences between Syrians and British. When Assad’s regime started a brutal crackdown of demonstrators and the opposition at the wake of the Arab Spring, many British Lords and noblemen (including the Queen herself) still see Fawaz as a good friend and someone respected. Fawaz efforts to bring the Assad regime and the UK closer together however, have ended in failure (Booth). Both the ambassadors of US and UK to Syria have continuously bashed Assad online through blogs and social media, condemning the Assad regime’s “act of violence.”

### ***Syria and France***

Similar to the United States, the relationship between France and Syria hit an all time low when the Assad regime was suspected to have masterminded the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in year 2005 (France Diplomatie). During 2008 however, when an agreement was reached regarding Lebanon’s political crisis (known as the Doha Agreement) as well as indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel through Turkey, (France Diplomatie) French President Nicolas Sarkozy became the first Western leader to pay a diplomatic visit to Syria since the assassination of Rafik Hariri (Field).

Despite hesitation from Washington on Sarkozy's visit, the French believed that it would be in their best interest to have closer ties with Damascus because Syria has close ties to Iran, Hezbollah (based in Lebanon) and Hamas (based in the Gaza Strip). Therefore, Syria was an important ally to secure French as well as Western influence in the Middle East (Field). However, in the wake of the Arab Spring and Assad's suspected violent crackdown on innocent civilians and protesters, diplomatic relations with France all but ceased. France recalled their Ambassador to Syria back to Paris on November 16, 2011 (France Diplomatie)(one of the earliest) and also suspended Air France flights between Paris and Damascus (Field).

It is important to note during the uprising against Gaddafi, France was one of the earliest to condemn Gaddafi's regime as well as recognize the Libyan National Transition Council as the legitimate sovereign power in Libya. When the UN Security Council gave a go-signal (China and Russia abstained in the vote), France and Britain led the air strikes and missile launches on Gaddafi forces. According to a point of view of Michael Elliot, several reasons why this action was taken are because France and Britain wanted to show the world that they were still super powers. They also want to let the world know that it is a safer place if other Western countries apart from the United States would carry some burden in ensuring stability in the free world (Elliot).

In an interview with the Embassy of France located in Washington, the reason why the same attack did not occur in Syria was because of the following reasons:

- 1) While the United Nations received a green light to use military force to protect civilians in Libya, the same resolution on dealing with Syria has been continuously blocked by Russia and China, who are permanent members of the United Nations (Juppé).
- 2) The context of Syria and Libya are very different in terms of their communities (Juppé)
- 3) Unlike the Syrian Crisis, the Arab countries under UNSCR 1973 as presented by the Security Council supported military intervention (Juppé).

Since the first UN proposed resolution to demand Assad to step down, the United States, France and the UK have continuously voted for this resolution. However, the resolution has continuously met resistance from Russia and China who both possess veto power as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

### ***Syria and Russia***

When Western Nations pushed for tough economic sanctions against Syria, especially banning the import of Syrian oil, it is estimated that Syria as of May 2012 has lost over seven billion US dollars in oil revenues. Syria however, prevented the total collapse of its economy through the protection, aid and trade with its allies such as Russia and Iran (Masters). Russia is perhaps Syria's most important ally because on various reasons:

Firstly, Russia (along with China) are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and have veto power against any intervention against the Assad government, as of early August of 2012, Russia, backed by China has officially opposed a UN military intervention and economic sanctions on the Assad Regime for the third time already

Secondly, Russia has been (and still is) a long time supplier of arms to the Assad Regime. The Obama Administration has continuously accused Russia of escalating the crisis by supplying Syria with weapons. Russia of course has acknowledged that it is honouring its commitment to Syria by supplying Syria with Russian tanks, attack helicopters and other forms of military equipment, although they said they did so without any intention of harming civilians, a statement US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed as false (Sly). According to the United Nations peacekeeping official, during the Syrian Crisis, the government has lost control of large amounts of land (when rebels sprung up around Syria since the Arab Spring) and the government will be fighting to retake the fallen areas from rebel forces (Sly).

The truth is, Russia's actions, while condemned by Western powers, are completely legitimate and Russia has every right to sell weapons to any country (just as Western powers have the right to supply rebel forces (be it secretly or accused by

opposing parties) with weapons and communication equipment and also the fact that the arms sales agreements were made long before the Syrian Crisis). While Russia released a statement saying they have no plans of granting Assad asylum (Gutterman) they were firm in the fact that they will never endorse a call for Assad to step down nor for any external interference to dictate what Syrians must do (FirstPost World). Russia also stressed why Iran (crucial player in the region) was not included in the UN Security Council meeting in Geneva (FirstPost World).

Therefore, a big question remains: why is Russia so committed to defending the Assad regime?

Russia has always maintained close ties with Hafez Al-Assad which the good relations were passed on to his son, Bashar Al-Assad. Since the Arab Spring began, Syria is Russia's only remaining ally in the Middle East (FirstPost World). Apart from the billions of dollars of weapon deals, the fall of the Assad regime would mean Russia possibly losing influence in the Middle East.

Even before the Arab Spring, Afghanistan and Iraq have been attacked and replaced with a government backed by the United States. During the Libyan crisis, Gaddafi was a long time ally of Russia. Russia chose to simply abstain from the no-fly zone and when this led to a Western air and missile attack which aided the rebels in defeating Gaddafi, the Libyan Transitional Council received the backing from Western powers – increasing the influence of Western powers in the Middle East – and this is something that Russia opposes (FirstPost World). Even as the war in Syria becomes bloodier, rather than continuously backing Assad, Russia instead turns to different reasons: military intervention may cause more bloodshed; the Syrian opposition is composed of extremists and have also a darker side in them such as executing captured soldiers loyal to Assad (FirstPost World). Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov insists that opposition forces must soften up their demands if any talks of peace are to take place (note that opposition forces have continuously disagreed to the party talks if it does not call for the Assad's ceding of power and position (FirstPost World).



Just as Russia is being accused of increasing the bloody situation in Syria, Russia in return accuses Western powers, especially the United States of double standards. According to defence analyst Ruslan Pukhov, during the Arab Spring, US arms sales with Bahrain took place. Furthermore, Russia finds on problems when the CIA (US), French and British send weapons to the rebels via Turkey (Rosenberg).

### ***Syria and China***

China's intentions are similar in terms of exerting influence in the Middle East, but compared to Russia, China has less to lose because they don't have as close relationship to Assad as Russia and neither are their arms sales as big as Russia's to Syria. If my question regarding Russia is "Why is Russia so committed..." then my question regarding China is "Why did China choose to back Russia?"

China believes that the proposed resolution to use outside military intervention and force Assad from office is very one sided (favouring only the opposition and also the desires of Western Powers.) According to China, they wish to see dialogue and peace talks between both the Assad government and the opposition (Weitz). They also believe that agreeing to the resolution proposed by the Western parties will only legitimize the use of force against Assad and insists that Syria's issues must be settled by the Syrian people and without outside intervention (Weitz). They also believe that Assad will not accept resignation as a part of the agreement and even if he does resign, does not mean that Syria's bloodshed will stop nor will stability in Syria be returned. China also accuses Western governments backing the resolution of lashing and embarrassing China and Russia rather than seeking a compromise which would push the peace talks (note that China has denied keeping Assad in office).

It is my belief that China also believes that the fall of Assad would mean a huge probability that the opposition who will replace Assad will be a Western backed government. It is clear that China and Russia has learned much during the Western intervention of toppling Gaddafi. Note that China also encountered the Jasmine Revolution in the wake of the Arab Spring, so Gaddafi's fall has made China's leaders very uneasy. In fact, China was one of the last to officially recognize the Libyan

transitional council (Garnaut). When I was following the war in Libya, China never showed any form of support while the opposition was battling Gaddafi (There were even suspicions that China sold weapons to aid Gaddafi, something that China denies) (Bodeen). Only when Gaddafi's defeat came did China recognize the new Libyan government and volunteered to extend financial aid to rebuilt Libya.

### **Syria, Iran and Hezbollah**

#### **Syria and Iran**

There are so many factors that draw Iran and Syria together. Iran and Syria has shared a deep bond and a long history. When the Iran-Iraq war first broke out in 1980, Syria found a promising ally who was also against Saddam Hussein. When Saddam's reign ended (thus the end of the Iraqi threat) with the assault of US-British troops, Syria and Iran's bond has further deepened with their support of Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas (Will Fulton), both considered terrorist organizations by the Western world and much of the international community. Both also share the same hatred for Israel and have both become countries that have faced increasing isolation initiated from the Western Powers.

When the Arab Spring occurred and a huge opposition emerged demanding Assad to cede power, Iranian officials dispatched advisors, training personnel to help Assad deal with the anti-regime along with over 23 million US dollars for Syria to build a military base in Latakia, a port in Syria to back Damascus with its much needed supplies to quell the opposition (Will Fulton).

Both countries have also supported each other when it came to their nuclear programs. While Syria has stood by Iran's nuclear program as "peaceful", Israel has accused Iran of helping Syria build its nuclear program the same year when Iran and Syria's joint attempts failed to gain them a seat in the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors (Will Fulton).

In late July of 2012, before the Assad forces attacked Aleppo, the most populous city of Syria, the foreign minister of Syria, Walid Al-Muallem visited Tehran (Iran's

capital) unannounced as Syria turns to one of their most important allies. He met with Iranian foreign minister Ali-Akbar Salehi in a joint press conference (Taha). Part of their motives for doing so, is to assert that they still have strong supporters amidst their growing isolation and still a strong force to reckon with – having claimed to have driven the opposition from Damascus and would soon claim to defeat the opposition trying to keep Aleppo from Assad's control.

Iran has continuously warned against foreign intervention in Syria and threatened the United States and their Western Allies backing the UN resolution that the chaos would engulf Israel, a vital ally to the Western powers (Reuters). It has accused the United States and other countries (who were no longer mentioned in detail) of supporting the rebels to remove Bashar Al-Assad from office and also accused Arab nations such as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia of promoting further violence while Iran has continuously supported Assad in their efforts to crush the opposition (Reuters). The irony in this is that the person who mentioned this, Iran parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, is a critic of current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and expected to run for president of Iran in 2013 (Reuters). Iran's deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian also said that thousands of weapons have entered Syria and may be used by terrorists groups such as Al Qaeda (Reuters) – thus saying in short that the US and other foreign supporters were supporting terrorists in Syria.

Iran, Russia and even China support the six-point plan that UN peace envoy Kofi Annan proposed to resolve the Syrian crisis. When Kofi Annan resigned recently due to finger pointing and name-calling, while Western powers accuse Russia and China for failing to stop the crisis through the UN resolution; Russia and Iran has accused the Western powers of the failure in Annan's plan.

### ***Syria and Hezbollah***

Hezbollah - known as "Party of God" is a militant *Shia* group incepted in 1980 and has become one of the most organized and professional groups in the Middle East. Many nations, including the United States, Israel and much of Europe regard Hezbollah as a terrorist network. While their political figures have been placed in several seats in

the Lebanese Parliament, its military forces have constantly trained, recruited, fought and conducted attacks towards the United States, Europe and Israel. While it is notorious in staging such attacks (Israel is most affected due to its close proximity to Lebanon), it has gained popular support from the minority *Shia* population through its financial support and social services (also known as Zakat one of the 5 pillars of Islam) towards the *Shia* population (Love).

Hezbollah receives support from both Iran and Syria – a unique relationship which stems from similar goals, motives yet different strategic interests (Love). While the United States intelligence as of 2006 have not seen evidence that Iran dominated or controlled Hezbollah, it is certain that Iran is one of Hezbollah's main sources of weapons and financial support. In fact Iranian Al Quds forces (IRGC elements that train abroad) have taken part in training Hezbollah (Cordesman). Iran has also provided Hezbollah with different arrays of weaponry to attack Israel (labelled as the Zionist regime) including short ranged Katyusha-type rockets (capable of striking Israel at a short distance of 7-12 kilometres), long range artillery rockets, (capable of hitting as long as 30 kilometres or 20 miles into Israel), 100 rockets capable of hitting 30-40 kilometres, anti-tank weapons (designed by Iranian engineer), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (for surveillance in Israel) and even anti-ship missiles used to attack Israeli ships (Cordesman). In fact, one of Hezbollah's three pillars (the foundation of Hezbollah), which recognizes the jurisdiction of the al-Wali al-Faqih (the god appointed spiritual guide and legitimate authority in Islamic governance) (Alagha) originated from Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini's concept.

Iran has viewed Hezbollah as a vehicle in which to export its "revolution" to the rest of Arab World; harass Israel and wage a proxy war against Iran's sworn enemy and would deter potential threats from the United States and Israel which would provide Iran a strategic foothold of the area without using its capital or military force (Love).

Syria has also provided financial aid and weapons to Hezbollah. Syria has a strategic interest in Lebanon because of its close proximity (as Syria's neighbour). Syria's primary interest in Lebanon starting from its independence in 1943 and the time when Syria's military intervened in 1976 was security (Avi-Ran). Ever since the Israeli

occupation of Southern Lebanon in 1982, Syria has always supported Hezbollah constantly (Tarabulsi). Syria has always acted as a conduit for weapons, supplies, men and training for Hezbollah (IICC) and while former Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad regarded Hezbollah as merely a pawn to fight Israel, his successor Bashar Al-Assad regarded Hezbollah as a “strategic partner” (Love),(Ibid). This relationship with Hezbollah enabled Syria to maintain its good relationship with Iran, maintain influence over Lebanon, indirectly strike Israel and the United States and further support radical Islamic forces to further its cause (Norton).

Hezbollah’s support for Assad has remained strong (Mohyeldin). Despite the seemingly high stakes involved, such as the possibility of the Assad regime falling (thus losing Syria as its future supporter) and losing supporters (note that one reason why Hezbollah has been popular was because of its principles, but siding with Assad rather than the thousands of resistance fighting Assad may be contradictory to those principles) (Barnard). Hezbollah has also offered to give Assad refuge in Lebanon (in particular, the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon) and that Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary general would dispatch elite military units to stand by Bashar Al-Assad and fight the rebels in Syria (Al-Gomhori).

Iran and Hezbollah are vital allies to Syria’s Assad and as Syria’s isolation deepens, their relationship will be as vital as ever in their survival.

### **International Bodies Intervene: United Nations, European Union and Arab League**

While the United Nations is unable to execute any resolutions on what to do due to the veto power of China and Russia on the UN backed resolution to force Assad from power, various sanctions were imposed on Syria by international organizations.

On May of 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions on Assad and nine other senior Syrian military officials (Human Rights First). 4 months after, on September 2011, the European Union imposed an oil embargo on Syria and threatened it with further sanctions should it continue with its bloody crackdown (Human Rights First). This was perhaps the heaviest sanction that Syria could endure –prior to the uprising

which erupted on March 2011, Syria would have 7-8 million dollars a day in oil revenue coming from European countries (Masters).

The Arab League likewise suspended Syria as its member on November of 2011 (Human Rights First). This likewise hurt the Assad regime because of the growing isolation on being unable to do any transactions with its Middle East neighbours so long as it is tied to the Assad regime (Masters). It is with so much pressure that the Assad regime signs the Arab League peace plan to allow observers into the country on December of 2011 (Human Rights First). This was hailed as an important step to resolving the crisis since at the start of the uprising, Syria immediately closed its borders to any international media or outside party and any reports coming from within its borders could not be independently verified by much of the international community and international media. The Arab League monitors however, would end up leaving Syria on January unable to prevent the death of civilians; from early December 2011 to late January 2012, the death toll climbed from an estimated 5000 civilians to over 6000 civilians (Human Rights First).

After Russia and China blocked one UN resolution after another imposing sanctions and forcing Assad to step down, Kofi Annan was appointed as a joint special envoy to the Syrian crisis on February 2012 by UN Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon and Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby (Human Rights First).

After months of negotiations, on early July of 2012 it would seem that Kofi Annan finally brokered a peace plan in which President Assad would agree to an end to the violence through political dialogue (Telegraph.co.uk). Kofi Annan also talked about the six point peace plan which is composed of the following terms:

- 1) Syria would commit to work with Mr. Annan in a Syrian led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people (TheNational)
- 2) Syria commits to stop fighting (including troop movements and heavy weapons on populated areas) Under UN supervision; there must be similar commitments from the opposition to stop all fighting. (TheNational)

- 3) Syrian parties must allocate two hours daily to allow humanitarian aid and evacuate injured people (TheNational)
- 4) Syria must commit to intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons (along with the complete list of where these people are held) (TheNational)
- 5) Provide freedom of movement to journalists and not restrict visa policies for them (TheNational)
- 6) Lastly, commit to respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully and legally guaranteed (TheNational)

Apart from being agreed by Assad's regime, this was also supported by the entire United Nations Security Council. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it a "positive step with the council speaking with one voice" while William Hague, British foreign secretary would urge Syrian authorities to use this chance to stop the bloodshed (Weaver). It was clear though that although the Western powers did back the plan, their concern was mainly to end the bloodshed plaguing Syria. Much of the opposition and human rights activists vying for Assad to leave however, were disappointed and even reacted sarcastically to Kofi Annan's plan. Furthermore, the fighting continued between both sides, especially which government forces steps in retaking fallen areas of Damascus and Aleppo. Heavy weapons and attack helicopters were still used and the opposition continued their attack against Assad as well, sparking a new wave of deaths and a divided UN Security Council arguing and blaming one another for the failure of the six point peace plan which eventually led to Kofi Annan's resignation as the UN special envoy on August of 2012.

The crisis would only escalate with both sides at a seemingly deadlocked confrontation.

### **Assad's Will in the Face of the Crisis**

We have seen much determination and resiliency from the Assad regime in the face of growing isolation from outside and within. During the early weeks of the Arab Spring, Assad tried to make moves to bring about change that protesters were wanting

in Syria. These changes demanded by protesters included basic reforms, more freedom, multiparty political system and an end to emergency law (Wilkinson); some of these were placed on paper but they were far too little and too late to stop the chant of Assad to step down as President and be replaced with a “better government” who would look after the needs of the Syrian people.

After more than a year since the uprising began, the opposition has lost whatever faith they had left in Assad to deliver reform and have one common goal of ending Assad’s rule once and for all (Wilkinson) (this could also explain partly why the six party talks would fail on the part of the opposition).

Assad and his regime however, are equally prepared to face a long war of attrition to crush the opposition forces. Barely a few weeks after the call for Assad’s resignation begun on March 15, 2011, Syria’s cabinet resigns on March 29, 2011 yet Assad immediately appointed a new cabinet on April 3, 2011 (less than a week after his cabinet resigned) (Human Rights First). On July 18, 2012, a bomb explosion carried out by the opposition killed three important officials of Assad’s inner circle (Levs). Various nations siding with the called it as a huge blow to the Assad government as the blast occurred in a national security building at the heart of Damascus killing Defense Minister Dawood Rajiha, Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat (who was Assad’s brother-in-law) and Hasan Turkmani, who was Assad’s security adviser and also assistant vice president with many more injured including interior minister Ibrahim al-Shaar (Levs).

Such attacks would have brought a major concern to the stability and capacity of the Assad government to weather the crisis it is facing, but despite this, the Assad regime immediately appointed General Fahed Jassim al-Frej to replace the slain defense minister and accused the opposition of conducting terrorist attacks (while the opposition claims that the bomb was well planned out and detonated via remote set up by Assad forces who wanted to defect, the Assad regime says that the bomb was the cause of a suicide bomb (Malas).) Furthermore, it only intensified their attacks on opposition forces scattered around Damascus. Eventually, Damascus reverted back to Assad’s control, enabling the regime forces to focus on taking Aleppo.



Throughout the uprising, more and more of Assad's military men and political allies have been defecting, the most prominent of them being Syrian Prime Minister Riad Farid Hijab (AlJazeera.com) who defected early August via Turkey at the time when Syrian forces were pounding Aleppo, and even Syria's first astronaut General Muhammed Ahmed Faris (ChannelNewsAsia.com). Despite the number of officers and soldiers defecting, Assad's will to crush the opposition does not seem to be wavering. He has continuously turned to his ally Iran for political support and Russian supplied weaponry, tanks and attack helicopters to rout rebel resistance.

### **How will the Syrian Crisis End?**

This is perhaps the big question everyone is anticipating. Hundreds and thousands of Syrian refugees have fled through Syria's borders. Through Syria's west, over 34,742 individuals (as of August 7, 2012) have escaped to Lebanon; through Syria's north, over 46,294 individuals (as of August 8, 2012) have fled to Turkey; through Syria's east, over 8,445 individuals (as of July 25, 2012) have fled to Iraq and through Syria's south, over 39,600 individuals (as of August 7, 2012) have fled through Jordan (UNHCR). The numbers however, are increasing day by day as fierce fighting continuous between Assad's forces and the opposition.

Syria's situation is actually more complicated than just "Assad leaving office." Some actually link it to sectarian violence: large portions of Syria's population are largely Sunni Muslims, while their ruler, Bashar Al-Assad and much of his allies in power are mostly Shiite Muslims. To add to it: there are many concerns that Sunni States like Turkey and Saudi Arabia would back up the Syrian resistance while Shiite majority Iran and Iraq, would back Assad up (Masters).

There are those who also say that more than just Syria's crisis is an intelligence battle that is taking place between US, NATO, Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and on the other side Russia, China, Iran and those that resist any intervention (Nazemroaya). For instance, Germany's foreign intelligence service, Bundes Nachrichtendienst has placed the blame on the bombings in Syria on Al Qaeda. Doing

this however, whether true or not, detracts the roles that the US intelligence agencies and their allies have played in Syria (Nazemroaya). Another instance would be that Saudi Arabia, who has called for Assad to resign, had intelligence sources that report that Masher Al-Assad, Assad's younger brother was responsible for the deaths of the Syrian officials during the bombing because of a rift while Pakistan intelligence denies it as saying that Masher was also injured during the attack (Nazemroaya) (Bluwi). These are just glimpses of how complicated the intelligence battle is regarding the Syrian Crisis.

There is also an issue about Syria threatening to use chemical weapons against outside forces. While this has further raised concerns over the international community, particularly the United States and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, Syria has repeatedly emphasized that chemical weapons would not be used on its own citizens and merely on outside forces and that Syria is on "self-defense mode. (The Sydney Morning Herald)" This firm statement is to make sure that foreign armies would think twice before backing up the Syrian opposition and also not twist the statement or misunderstand Syria's statement to justify using foreign intervention.

The United Nations deadlock between the 5 permanent members Russia and China vs. the United States, UK and France has given us doubts that outside military intervention would ever take place. The context of the crisis in terms of international relations is for me one of the most important factors in Syria's present and future fate. Assad hopes that while Russia and China prevents any intervention, his forces would be able to crush the Free Syrian Army. Note before that while the United Nations Security Council was debating on a no-fly zone "to protect civilians" in Libya during Gaddafi's regime, Gaddafi was rushing to crush the opposition before any decision was made. Unfortunately for Gaddafi, just when Benghazi, the last opposition stronghold was about to be attacked and retaken, the no-fly zone was passed and NATO forces immediately dispatched airplanes to bomb Gaddafi's forces. While I believe that Assad may have the same mindset as Gaddafi in quickly defeating the opposition as soon as possible, the scenario of Libya would not likely happen in Syria anytime soon.

Bluwi of Arab News presents four possible options to the end of the Syrian crisis. The first would be for Assad to step down and safely leave Syria; the second would be Assad taking Aleppo and taking the battle to Turkey; the third would be the army taking over and forming a military council such as the scenario in Egypt and the fourth option is to find a solution outside the Security Council (Bluwi).

Syria's complicated crisis, coupled with sectarian violence, intelligence battles, international relations and security concerns makes it difficult to us to really predict how the Syrian crisis would end. For now, it remains a question mark.

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