Scenario One: Regionalized Conflict

As regional powers contend for influence within Syria through imperfectly controlled proxies, escalated fighting fragments the country along sectarian and ethnic lines, putting to rest any hope for a negotiated settlement. The conflict bleeds across borders, effectively overturning the post-World War I regional order in the Middle East, and invites competitive intervention by Great Powers.

Scenario Two: Contained Civil War

As a result of conclusions among great powers and regional actors that unrestrained support to favored factions within Syria has produced diminishing returns, the risk of regional spillover is limited. These restraints do not, however, permit a resolution to the conflict. Instead, the civil war remains tenuously contained within Syria, settling into a protracted, multi-sided sectarian conflict with aspects of proxy war among regional rivals.

Scenario Three: Negotiated Settlement

A subtle and potentially transitory shift in the power balance within Syria creates sufficient incentive for most parties to negotiate and enables outside actors to exert pressure toward a settlement. As century-old political boundaries dissolve and sectarian enclaves emerge, a North-South partition and cease-fire holds, with potential for a formalized political settlement on the horizon.
PAST SCENARIOS INITIATIVES

Iraq Post-2010
March 30, 2007

Iran 2015
January 25, 2008

China 2020
October 16, 2009

Russia 2020
February 26, 2010

Turkey 2020
May 21, 2010

Ukraine 2020
October 22, 2010

Pakistan 2020
April 29, 2011

Reports are available online for all Scenarios at http://cgascenarios.wordpress.com
PROJECT OVERVIEW

The scenarios presented in this document are based on the Syria scenarios workshop, held on February 7-8, 2013 at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs (CGA). This was the eighth in a series of workshops organized by the CGA Scenarios Initiative, which aims to reduce surprise and illuminate U.S. foreign policy choices through scenario-building exercises. Previous events focused on Iraq, Iran, China, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine and, Pakistan. The workshops on China, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Pakistan, and Syria were funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

In both official and academic policy debates, the future is often expected to parallel the recent past. Potential discontinuities are dismissed as implausible, information that conflicts with prevailing mindsets or policy preferences is unseen or viewed as anomalous, pressure for consensus drives out distinctive insights, and a fear of being “wrong” discourages risk-taking and innovative analysis. This conservatism can obscure, and thus reduce, foreign policy choice. Our experience, through several workshops, is that experts tend to underestimate the degree of future variability in the domestic politics of seemingly stable states. This was the case with the Soviet Union, as it is now in the Middle East and, suddenly, in Turkey and Brazil. Globalization, financial volatility, physical insecurity, economic stresses, and ethnic and religious conflicts challenge governments as never before, and require that Americans think seriously about both risk and opportunity in such uncertain circumstances.

The CGA Scenarios Initiative aims to apply imagination to debates about pivotal countries that affect U.S. interests. The project assembles the combination of knowledge, detachment, and futures perspective essential to informing decisions taken in the presence of uncertainty. The project comprises long-term research on forces for change in the international system and workshops attended by experts and policymakers from diverse fields and viewpoints. The workshops examine the results of current research, create alternative scenarios, identify potential surprises, and test current and alternative U.S. policies against these futures.

Michael F. Oppenheimer, the founder of the project, has organized over thirty such projects for the State and Defense Departments, the National Intelligence Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the President’s Science Advisor. He is a Clinical Professor at the Center for Global Affairs at New York University.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The scenarios presented in this document were prepared by faculty and students at the Center for Global Affairs, based on discussions at a two-day workshop and additional research. The group of experts participating in the workshop was assembled by Michael Oppenheimer.

Please note that the views expressed in this report are those of the authors at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Carnegie Corporation of New York or of workshop participants.

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In March 2011, the mass protests that had already forced powerful autocrats out of office in Egypt and Tunisia, and sparked uprisings in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, finally reached Syria. The trajectory of the Syrian uprising, however, has proven far more destructive and destabilizing than its counterparts across the Middle East. As it moves through its third year, conflict in Syria has wreaked terrible havoc on Syria’s people and its economy. By mid-2013, more than a quarter of Syria’s population—6.8 million people—required humanitarian assistance. Almost two million had fled into neighboring countries. Syria’s social fabric had frayed to the breaking point by deepening sectarian polarization. External actors were escalating their intervention on both sides. The spillover of violence from Syria into every neighboring state had also increased, with Lebanon’s stability coming under particular strain. On June 21, 2013, Paulo Pinheiro, Chairman of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, described the country as being in “free fall,” a place where “crimes that shock the conscience have become a daily reality.”

What does conflict on this scale portend for Syria’s future, and for the future of the Levant? The three scenarios presented here—regionalized conflict, contained civil war, and negotiated settlement—offer equally plausible answers to these questions. Their relevance has not diminished since they were first developed at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs in the midst of a February blizzard. Indeed, events of the intervening months underscore not only their continuing plausibility, but also the importance of the careful effort that went into the development of each scenario, unpacking the causal processes through which each of them could unfold over the coming five years, and highlighting the specific drivers that could move Syria along each of these three tracks. Extraneous detail has been edited away to bring the fundamental interests, motivations, intentions, and capabilities of actors to the fore. The result is a compelling and persuasive set of plausible futures for Syria during the period from today to 2018. None shy away from the hard facts about what Syria has gone through and what it is likely to face in the coming years.

Many attempts at prediction fail. Long-term predictions are especially unreliable. My best guess is that none of the participants in the February meeting predicted the Syrian uprising six months before it occurred, far less five years ago. Why should we take these predictions more seriously? They resulted not from the individual assessments of error- and bias-prone experts, but from a structured, collective process that provided ample opportunity to test underlying assumptions, challenge arguments, and deliberate about the probability that certain outcomes would occur—given what we know today.
The scenarios grew out of two days of intensive discussion among a small number of scholars, analysts, and practitioners whose perspectives on Syria were exceptionally diverse; there was no groupthink among the members of this particular group. Participants gathered at the invitation of Michael Oppenheimer, director of the Scenarios Initiative at New York University. After zeroing in on the three scenarios that were viewed as warranting further analysis—itself a challenging process that underscored the depth of differences among participants—the group took part in a fascinating thought experiment in predictive thinking. Guided by Oppenheimer, and with additional participants around the table, each of the scenarios was carefully and thoroughly scrutinized, elaborated, refined, and honed to the point at which they then met a pretty high threshold of plausibility among a pretty tough crowd.

As I return to the scenarios some months following the February meeting, I am again impressed by the results of the Scenarios Initiative process. The three scenarios presented here deserve careful consideration by officials charged with responding to the deepening crisis in Syria, and by a wider audience of those concerned about where Syria’s conflict might be headed. If forewarned is forearmed, these scenarios leave us all better positioned to engage effectively today in ways that may help Syria avoid at least some of the darkest tomorrows that these scenarios describe.

Steven Heydemann, Ph.D.  
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June 24, 2013
SCENARIO 1:
REGIONALIZED CONFLICT

INTRODUCTION

This scenario outlines how the sectarian, ethnic, and geopolitical cleavages that have roiled Middle East politics for decades are further widened by the escalating stalemate inside Syria. As with the “Contained Civil War” scenario below, outside actors furnish arms and funds to their respective clients at a level sufficient to safeguard their interests, while trying to avoid direct engagement in the hostilities. In this “Regionalized Conflict” scenario, however, events on the ground trump these calculations, rendering a strategy of calibrated violence unfeasible. Escalated fighting fans sectarian hatreds and murderous campaigns against civilian populations. As the country fragments along sectarian and ethnic lines, attitudes harden and hopes for a negotiated settlement are doused. As regional players respond in kind to shifting dynamics in the fighting with increased support to their faction of choice, momentary advantages enjoyed by one side are eventually countered by others, producing an uncontrollable stalemate.

A regionalized conflict is, in fact, already well under way, with regional powers contending for influence through (imperfectly controlled) proxies, sectarian violence and refugee outflows threatening the fragile sectarian and ethnic fabric of nearby states, and increasing armed clashes across borders. While the “Contained Civil War” scenario imagines how these forces might be managed, this scenario suggests how inherently tenuous such a “managed” stalemate would be.

THE PATH TO 2018
2013-2014: Escalating Chaos

As the Syrian conflict entered its third year, steady arms transfers from regional actors fed increasingly brutal fighting on the ground. As murderous campaigns against civilian populations fanned sectarian hatreds, the country continued to fragment along sectarian and ethnic lines, dousing hopes for a negotiated settlement. In several cases, the fragile sectarian and ethnic balance of neighboring states was upset by a spillover of violence and refugee influxes. As the government in Damascus and its multifarious opponents pressed for both advantage in the fighting and survival, they increasingly called on their respective patrons for greater assistance. With vital strategic interests tied up in the ultimate outcome of Syria’s war, no regional actor could resist deeper engagement.

Sharply divergent agendas in Syria among the Great Powers both contributed significantly to the regional impasse and heightened global tensions. While the Obama
Scenario One: Regionalized Conflict

administration remained wary of entanglement in another Middle East crisis in light of more pressing domestic priorities and a renewed strategic commitment to Asia, its momentous introduction of lethal support to opposition forces in June 2013 reflected high-level consensus that the defeat of Bashar al-Assad’s Baathist regime would deal a debilitating blow to America’s greatest regional adversary, Iran. Moreover, remaining completely aloof from the fighting became an increasingly untenable option, as Sunni Islamist influence within the Syrian opposition steadily grew, and European allies and influential factions on Capitol Hill agitated for supplying weaponry to secular elements of Assad’s opponents.

Washington’s stepped-up provision of lethal aid to the opposition during 2013, as well as its less conspicuous role in facilitating arms shipments from Arab governments and Turkey,iii stirred familiar concerns in Moscow about U.S. intentions in the Middle East and the lack of constraints on its power. By the middle of 2013, Russia had already thrice vetoed U.S.-inspired UN resolutions calling for Assad to relinquish power. While the Assad family was a longstanding ally of the Kremlin’s, the reasons for Russian obstruction and robust support for the government in Damascus extended far beyond status considerations. Russian elites viewed recent regional events as highly destabilizing, and were fearful that the Arab Spring trend of secular autocrats being replaced by Sunni Islamist regimes could inspire similar developments along their southern borders or, worse, encourage aggrieved Russian Muslims in the North Caucasus. Besides fearing instability along its borders, the Kremlin believed that Washington’s call for Assad’s removal, coming on the heels of its role in toppling Moammar Gaddafi in Libya, was the latest example of an unbridled hegemon throwing its weight around without consideration for how its actions impacted others and using democracy promotion as a fig leaf for replacing governments it disliked.iv Russia’s decision in May 2013 to deliver S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Assad, justified at the time as aimed at deterring foreign “hotheads” from intervening in the conflict,v signified its determination to thwart Western designs in Syria and further strained an already tense relationship with the U.S. By the end of 2014, clashing interests in Syria had plunged Russo-American relations to their lowest point since the Georgian conflict of August 2008.

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Iran intently watched developments in Syria, serving an indispensable role as Assad's key ally via extensive military, economic, and diplomatic support. Its security and intelligence services continued training and advising Assad's state military and security organizations, providing essential military supplies to Damascus, and directly supporting pro-government Syrian shabiha militias. Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Iranian Baseej forces actively participated in combat operations against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and in attacks on civilians. The stakes were very high for Tehran; the Baathist government had served as Iran's only major Arab ally for the past 30 years, as well as a vital conduit for Iranian arms to Hezbollah, its Lebanese client. The heavy fighting in Syria, abetted by feeding Assad's military machine, was also appreciated by Iranian elites as a means of distracting the West's attention from their program of uranium enrichment. Yet, even while working closely with Hezbollah to prop up Assad, it also sought to maximize its strategic options by assiduously cultivating Shiite militias inside Syria that could serve as reliable operatives in the event of Assad's defeat.

While Hassan Rouhani's victory in the presidential election of June 2013 inspired cautious optimism in some circles that Iran would pursue a foreign policy more agreeable to Western interests, these hopes were ultimately dashed. A member of Iran's conservative establishment, Rouhani was more preoccupied in 2013-14 with consolidating his domestic authority and courting centers of power in Tehran than with putting his stamp on national security policy. Foreign policy in general, and strategy toward Syria in particular, remained, as it always had, subject to the priorities and preconceptions of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Firm support for Assad was preserved intact, even more so after Washington upped the ante with the extension of lethal assistance to Syria's opposition forces.

For Hezbollah, the strategic imperative of keeping Assad afloat was even greater, as his survival was inextricably linked to maintaining its own politico-military primacy in Lebanon and sustaining the arms pipeline from Iran. As one Hezbollah commander observed at the time, "If Bashar [al-Assad] goes down, we're next." Heightening Hezbollah's calculus of threat was the role its primary rivals, Lebanese Sunni militants, who were furnishing support to Syrian opposition forces comprised mainly of Sunni Muslims, Syria increasingly became a staging ground for the forceful expression of Lebanon's pent-up sectarian tensions, as Shiites and Sunnis from Lebanon exchanged direct blows. The risk of this fighting spilling back into Lebanon and upsetting the country's fragile political stalemate was constant, however. A turning point in this respect came in the spring of 2013, when Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, openly declared his support for the Syrian government and directed his fighters to lead an assault on the strategic rebel-held town of Qusayr. In doing so, he effectively transformed a popular resistance movement against Israel into a starkly sectarian militia, which stirred the suspicions and fears of Lebanon's increasingly radicalized Sunni community. In the wake of Hezbollah's show of force, Syrian opposition groups,
with the encouragement of their Lebanese Sunni allies, fired rockets on Hezbollah strongholds in eastern Lebanon, setting in motion a dangerous cycle of cross-border retaliatory actions throughout 2013-14.xiv

While Israel was inclined to remain aloof from the fighting on its eastern flank, events drove it in another direction. For Israel, the Assad family’s rule had proven largely stable and predictable. Syria’s internecine warfare now presented a host of deeply troubling possible outcomes to Tel Aviv: the displacement of Assad’s secular regime by an even more hostile Sunni Islamist entity featuring elements affiliated with al-Qaeda; an increasingly desperate Assad looking to shore up his crumbling authority by lashing out against Israel; or an attempt by Iran to take advantage of the Syrian melee by transferring weapons of mass destruction to Hezbollah.xv Averting the latter development accounted for Israeli air strikes in May 2013 against Iranian surface-to-surface missiles en route to Hezbollah, as well as a military base in Damascus. Evidently undertaken out of a sense that this action would not be countered by an embattled Assad or a risk-averse Iran,xvi Israel could not assume that its regional adversaries would forever remain strategically cautious. For the remainder of 2013-14, Israel warily eyed unfolding events in Syria, cognizant that its security was impacted, yet ready to use force only as a last resort because of the potential for retaliatory action and spillover into its borders. Forestalling a regional conflagration was imperative when sufficient distraction was provided by Palestinian unrest in the Gaza Strip and Iran’s possible development of nuclear weapons.

Like other regional actors, Iraq’s government was deeply concerned that events in Syria could have destabilizing ramifications for sectarian tensions back home, as escalating Sunni protests against majority Shiite rule threatened to boil over into a widespread revolt.xvii With radical Sunni Islamist elements in Syria fighting adjacent to Anbar Province, a hotbed of Iraqi Sunni discontent, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki feared Assad’s defeat might free up these forces to transfer support to their Sunni brethren in Iraq.xviii Maliki was torn in different directions. While aware that full support of Assad, whose overthrow was largely supported by Iraqi Sunnis, could further widen Iraq’s sectarian divide, he was increasingly apprehensive that a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus could embolden his opposition in the western provinces. As the Nusra Front in Syria received a steady supply of money, expertise and fighters from Al Qaeda in Iraq,xix the same Sunni insurgent group that had killed numerous American troops in Iraq and fostered sectarian strife with suicide bombings against Shiites, Malik saw the need for greater assistance to Assad. Tensions escalated in April 2013, when a government-sponsored military raid against Sunni protesters at a camp near Kirkuk killed dozens, provoking Iraqi Sunni groups to establish military forces to counter the Iraqi army’s apparent crackdown.xx Besieged at home, Maliki came to see his own survival as inextricably linked to the preservation of Baathist rule in Damascus. He gradually stepped up diplomatic and materiel support to Assad throughout 2014, while continuing to allow Iraqi airspace to be used for Iranian arms shipments to Syria.
The spillover effects of Syria’s civil war were particularly destabilizing in Jordan, where a massive influx of Syrian refugees roiled a country already beset by formidable political and economic challenges. While King Abdullah II had managed to navigate the Arab Spring’s upheaval with minimal damage to his rule, he confronted growing public discontent over persistent economic austerity and the glacial pace of political reform, with ascendant Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist movements hoping to capitalize on this sentiment. By the end of 2013, almost a million Syrians were registered as refugees in Jordan, well in excess of 10 percent of the total population; at an estimated $1 billion, the staggering cost of managing this inflow strained Jordan’s economy to the breaking point despite additional Western assistance. Struggling to keep a lid on growing unrest at home, Abdullah sought to insulate his country from the Syrian fighting by establishing a buffer zone along the border. When massive protests erupted in the fall of 2014 after the revelation that malfeasance by the King’s inner circle had gone unpunished, Abdullah faced the dilemma of how to contain this threat to his rule without inducing support for Jordan’s Islamist movement from radicalized elements of Syria’s opposition fighters.

The potential for spillover was also high in Turkey. Having been spurned by Assad when he suggested that Syria’s opposition be placated by domestic reform, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had become one of the Baathist regime’s fiercest adversaries by 2013. At the forefront of those regional actors calling for Assad’s removal from power, Turkey hosted leading Syrian opposition groups and was both a major arms supplier and facilitator to Sunni factions fighting in Syria. A robust military presence along the Syrian border intermittently provoked minor skirmishes with Assad’s forces. Yet the initial failure to broker a peace settlement in Syria came to hit home especially hard, as tens of thousands of Syrians crossed into Turkey to escape the fighting. Perhaps even more worrying for Turkish leaders contending with a 30-year struggle for autonomy by their own Kurdish population were ominous signs of an emerging zone of influence in northeastern Syria controlled by the Syrian Kurds’ Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Fearing the consolidation of such a zone would bolster the Kurds’ cause in Turkey, Ankara first threatened military action against this area and supported Sunni Islamists in fights against PYD forces. Yet a subsequent focus on rejuvenated talks with the PKK yielded a new policy toward Syria’s Kurds. Throughout 2013-14, Erdogan attempted to co-opt them, in the hope that a Kurdish region in Syria under the Turks’ aegis could serve as a buffer against escalating violence to the south.

2015-2016: Sectarian Spillover and Deepening Great Power Engagement

As the brutal Syrian war dragged on indefinitely, it occasioned deeper Great Power engagement, often for domestic or strategic reasons unrelated to the war.
With the introduction of military assistance to opposition forces in June 2013, the Obama administration had invested its prestige in Assad's defeat, which led to the contemplation of still more escalatory actions, including the imposition of a no-fly zone over areas held by the opposition and the interdiction of supplies to the regime. Meanwhile, a simmering Syrian conflict came to be viewed by powerful factions within China's military, troubled and alarmed by the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, as a vehicle for diverting U.S. resources from their backyard. Beset by growing public unrest in response to unchecked official corruption and widening income inequality, President Xi Jinping was inclined to shore up his credibility with the powerful military by acceding to its recommendation for arms shipments to Assad's forces. When this decision was announced toward the end of 2015, Sino-American rivalry, driven by an escalating strategic competition in Asia, was effectively extended to the Middle East.

Ensuring that their respective proxy in Syria received sufficient support assumed symbolic significance for both powers; for Washington, it was a matter of demonstrating its staying power in a region long susceptible to its influence, while for Beijing extending a robust lifeline to Assad was a means of announcing its arrival in the Middle East. The enmeshment of Syria in a larger Great Power rivalry yielded spiraling arms shipments to all sides in the conflict, contributing to heightened violence and diminishing hopes for a negotiated settlement. Sino-Russian cooperation, already facilitated by mutual opposition to U.S. post-Cold War hegemony, increased significantly as both Beijing and Moscow saw strategic advantages arising from a blow to American prestige in Syria. Coordinated arms transfers and stout diplomatic backing of Assad had the effect of mitigating tensions stemming from China's expanding influence among the ex-Soviet states of Central Asia and in the sparsely populated Russian Far East. While talk of a consolidated anti-American alliance between China and Russia remained premature, the impetus for cooperation provided by Syria complicated U.S. global strategy and, at least temporarily, dashed any inclination to court the Kremlin as a potential strategic partner in checking Chinese ambitions.

The introduction of U.S. military aid to opposition fighters, as well as increased arms shipments from the Gulf powers and Turkey, gradually tipped the balance against a resilient Assad in 2015 and facilitated steady opposition advances on the ground. A turning point of sorts came in the summer, when opposition forces moved in on the Alawite stronghold in western Syria, triggering a mass exodus of tens of thousands into neighboring Lebanon. That country's already fragile sectarian balance was dramatically overturned. The great majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon up to that point had been anti-Assad Sunnis, who were warily watched by Hezbollah as potential allies of its domestic rivals. As the massive influx of Alawite newcomers in the summer of 2015 attracted cross-border fire from pursuing Syrian fighters, Hezbollah moved to protect them by stepping up attacks against both Syrian and Lebanese Sunni forces. Fighting once confined to Syria spilled over its western border, threatening to
reignite Lebanon’s civil war. As Hezbollah’s resources were increasingly consumed by domestic clashes, Iran assumed a greater share of the burden in propping up Assad. Even so, his uncertain fate, exacerbated by the flight of several of his generals from Damascus during the summer to protect remaining Alawites in the country’s western pocket, prompted Iran to shift more of its focus toward building up Syrian Shiite militias that could serve as Tehran’s proxies should the Baathists collapse. Accordingly, increasing numbers of Revolutionary Guards were inserted into Syria for training and military purposes.

The longstanding fear of regional actors that a tipping of the scales in Syria would reverberate across its borders was fully realized in 2015-16, as Sunni advances there inflamed sectarian tensions in neighboring states. Emboldened Iraqi Sunni militias, with the assistance of proximate anti-Assad forces in Syria, escalated their attacks against Baghdad’s increasingly heavy-handed rule and once again resorted to massive suicide bombings in Shiite regions. A besieged Maliki felt compelled by the end of 2015 to launch a full-scale crackdown to preserve Shiite hegemony, plunging Iraq to the virtual civil war conditions of 2006-07.

In Jordan, Islamist elements moved to capitalize on Sunni successes in neighboring Syria by assuming a more prominent role in the popular protests that had erupted in the fall of 2014, particularly in cities with significant numbers of Palestinians, reliable supporters of Jordan’s Islamists. As King Abdullah’s insistence on forcefully suppressing the unrest resulted in large numbers of deaths throughout 2015, foreign fighters from Syria, Egypt, and Iraq were drawn to Jordan to bring down a stalwart Western ally and aid their Sunni brethren. Having emerged relatively unscathed from the early stages of the Arab Spring, the Hashemite Kingdom now faced the greatest challenge to its once firm grip on power.

In Turkey, a once promising peace process with the PKK gradually broke down during 2015 over mutual recriminations. Neither side was ultimately willing to give the other what it most wanted; Ankara could not agree to a full pardoning of PKK forces, which, in turn, were reluctant to completely disarm. As the Turkish army and PKK resumed fighting, developments in Syria opened up both opportunities and threats for each side. Assad’s dwindling control of Syrian territory prompted the PKK and its PYD ally to consolidate their hold along the Turkish border region in early 2016. Erdogan, having by this time eased himself into a constitutionally enhanced presidency, responded to this provocation by heightening covert action inside a disintegrating Syria to disrupt this zone of influence and launching repressive measures against the Kurds in Turkey. In yet another example of how the Syrian conflict roiled the international climate, the European Union, already decidedly ambivalent about the prospect of Turkish membership, used Turkish actions as justification for ending intermittent membership negotiations in late 2016. The net result of this friction was a more pronounced Turkish shift away from the West.
2017-2018: Reignited Civil Wars and a Regional Showdown

By 2017, the Middle East’s myriad geopolitical, ethnic, and sectarian fault lines had been violently ruptured by Syria’s civil war, leaving in its wake an unmanageable, regionalized conflict that had effectively overturned the post-World War I regional order. Existing Middle Eastern states had fractured into tribal, religious, and political enclaves.xxvii Deeply embedded sectarian cleavages in Lebanon and Iraq that had been tenuously papered over by power-sharing governments had once again exploded into full-scale civil war. In both countries, competing factions for power had supported respective proxies in Syria’s war to boost their domestic authority, only to find that the fighting could not be confined to outside their borders. By the end of 2018, both Hezbollah and the Maliki government, while still wielding the greatest power, were diminished forces, under assault from resourceful, formidable sectarian adversaries determined to redress longstanding grievances and resist the yoke of Shiite primacy. There was no indication of when or how conflicts in Lebanon or Iraq would subside or produce a clear victor.

An equally dramatic illustration of how events in Syria could upend affairs elsewhere came in seemingly stable Jordan, for long under the thumb of the Hashemite Kingdom. As King Abdullah grappled throughout 2017-18 with a subversive threat abetted by Islamist fighters from Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, he pursued a dual-track policy of relying on his security forces to stamp out his inveterate enemies and burnishing his own Islamic credentials to curry favor among more pliable elements of the population. The latter tactic had significant ramifications for Jordan’s hitherto pro-Western foreign policy orientation.

Fighting in Syria itself was still raging by the end of 2018, with no end in sight. The country by this time had largely fragmented along sectarian lines within existing state boundaries; the Baathists continued to hold sway along the main urban corridor from Damascus to Homs, while the opposition controlled the northern, eastern, and southern provinces.xxviii The mass atrocities committed by all sides fanned intense hatred that militated against a negotiated settlement. Even as Assad had lost control over wide swaths of Syria, he could continue to draw on invaluable assistance from
Iran, Russia, and China, while enjoying the devotion of Alawites and grudging support of other Syrians who saw a successor regime as an existential threat.

Tensions emanating from Syria served as the backdrop to an alarming escalation in tensions between Iran and Israel, the region’s two most irreconcilable powers. As Iran searched for a way of both keeping Syria’s sizeable stock of WMD out of the hands of a potentially hostile successor regime and distracting the West’s attention as it neared nuclear breakout capability in the summer of 2017, it encouraged Assad to transfer some of his chemical weapons to a besieged Hezbollah in Lebanon. Desperately groping for a lifeline, Assad acceded to this provocative request. As it had intermittently throughout the war, Israel acted to prevent a transfer of weapons that could alter the balance of military power between it and Hezbollah. Discovering the planned transfer through its own intelligence, Israel promptly launched air strikes against Hezbollah positions in Lebanon, as well as weapons convoys within Syria. Responding contrary to Israeli expectations, an increasingly desperate Hezbollah, looking to rally domestic opinion as it fiercely battled Sunni militias, retaliated with a barrage of missile attacks against northern Israel.

By early 2018, frequent Israeli-Hezbollah armed exchanges had reached a level of violence not seen since the 2006 war. Emboldened by Hezbollah’s robust response to Israeli actions, Assad came to view his own crisis with Israel as a potential tonic for his woes. By the summer, Israel was thus engaged in virtual warfare against both Hezbollah and Assad’s troops, Iran’s two primary allies. Offering more fulsome support to them to demonstrate its regional credibility, Tehran funneled additional arms and Revolutionary Guards into Syria. When an Israeli air strike took out a platoon of Iranian forces in September, Iranian elites seriously deliberated the merits of direct military action against Israel. Such an option struck many power brokers in Tehran as both militarily feasible, in light of the perceived protection offered by newly acquired nuclear breakout capability, and politically imperative, as waves of Iranians protested against increasingly bleak economic conditions.
SCENARIO 2: Contained Civil War

INTRODUCTION

This scenario outlines how an increasingly violent and protracted civil war remains relatively contained within Syria. Outside actors furnish arms and funds in an attempt to promote their interests within the region and to balance the moves of their adversaries. This support is provided to various factions within the opposition and to Assad’s regime. It has the effect of fueling the violence within Syria, with frequent spillover across borders. Unlike the “Regionalized Conflict” scenario, however, it does not escalate to direct, sustained conflict between regional actors. The Syrian civil war instead settles into a protracted, multi-sided sectarian conflict with aspects of proxy war among regional rivals. This “containment” is a result of the self-interested calculation among Great Powers that unrestrained support to favored factions will produce diminishing returns, and among regional actors that their own internal political stability is imperiled by continued support for Syrian factions. These informal restraints limit the risk of regional conflagration, permitting the proxy war to continue largely unabated. They do not, however, lead the conflict toward resolution in the form of either military victory for one side or a negotiated settlement based on compromise. With a fractious opposition, increasing radicalization and heightened sectarian violence, persistent fighting across borders and unsustainable refugee flows, the long-term plausibility of “contained civil war”, without some formal understanding among outside actors or a political settlement among internal rivals, is very much open to doubt.
Through 2013, the civil war in Syria remained much as it had for the preceding two years: a steadily escalating, deeply entrenched and bloody stalemate. Outside actors continued to provide support to all sides, while weighing the increased costs of further involvement to ensure that they were not risking influence in their own countries. This kind of competitive support created momentary advantages for the Syrian regime, given its untapped internal resources and support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, but the Gulf states and slower moving democracies acted to maintain a rough military balance. This prevented the conflict from spilling catastrophically beyond Syria’s borders, but resulted in an ever more violent civil/proxy war.

The regime and its opponents continued to slowly escalate the levels of violence, with different combinations of internal and external constraints on both sides restricting the speed of their escalation. Regional actors and other external players continued to push their own interests within the country, with some states directly countering others’ aims. Persistent concerns over the lack of cohesion among opposition forces slowed the pace at which external actors were willing to dole out weapons and funds. Western states, particularly the United States, worried about the increasing influence of radical and jihadist elements within the opposition, principally Jabhat al-Nusra, with its open links to al-Qaeda. Apprehension that weapons could end up in hostile hands, as well as lessons gleaned from unrewarding stalemates in Iraq and Afghanistan, contributed to continued American restraint.

Opposition forces made periodic gains, occasionally taking territory and cities, but often holding them only briefly until the superior firepower of Assad’s Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) forced retreat. The SAF had significant advantages at its disposal, principally its air capabilities and significant caches of chemical weapons. Assad proved willing to use his air force to bombard rebel-held territory and bases. While President Obama and others had warned that the use of chemical weapons constituted a “red line,” reports continued to emerge throughout 2013 that Assad had deployed this arsenal against opposition forces.

Concerns regarding manpower continued to plague Assad, but a steady stream of Iranian personnel from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ Ground Forces (IRGC), Quds Force and Intelligence Organization flooded into Syria to fortify his army. Hezbollah, too, sent fighters from Lebanon. In mid-2013, as Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah committed the organization and its followers to the fight for Syria, more forces arrived, providing infantry for battles near Qusayr, Homs and Damascus, thereby helping Assad to fortify his position in western Syria. Despite these reinforcements, the near-constant fighting that had erupted at every corner of the country stretched the
Scenario Two: Contained Civil War

SAF thin. Only with Russian help was Assad able to partially address this concern. By hiring mercenaries from the Caucuses and receiving continued Russian arms shipments, moves widely condemned by the West, Assad maintained a slight upper hand.

The opposition’s failure to unify became increasingly apparent, both in the international arena and on the ground. The Syrian National Council (SNC) retained Syria’s seat at the Arab League and continued to meet regularly with the so-called Friends of Syria. Yet questions of leadership continued to undermine the capacity of the SNC, with Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib once again resigning the presidency in April 2013 after claiming that the international community was not willing to help the Syrian people. The coalition struggled to find even an adequate interim president, and the lack of leadership militated against any Western decision to intervene forcefully in Syria.

The lack of cohesion within the SNC was duplicated among nationalist rebels on the ground. Events in the northern capital of Raqqa proved instructive. When it was taken by opposition forces in March 2013, Raqqa was hailed as a significant victory: the first major urban capital taken and held by rebel forces. But as the opposition tried to establish a governing body, violent clashes between opposition factions arose throughout the city. FSA fighters and jihadist groups linked to al-Nusra, largely responsible for taking the city, were the primary combatants in the power struggle. Though the fighting was condemned by leaders of both factions, the FSA was forced to make concessions that allowed al-Nusra to implement Islamist governance through shari’a councils. Better financed, armed, trained and manned, al-Nusra was seen as indispensable if the opposition hoped to hold the city. Similar struggles occurred in northern cities, such as Ra’s al Ayn and Al Hasakah, where matters were further complicated by the presence of a Kurdish militia known as the Popular Defense Forces (YPG).

Seeing the increasing fragmentation of the opposition, proponents of intervention once again began to pressure the United States and its allies to vigorously support the nationalist FSA in order to bolster its chances of beating both Assad and the Islamist forces for control of the country. International pressure further increased in the early summer of 2013, when the United States, Britain and France confirmed that chemical weapons had been used multiple times by the regime against different opposition groups inside Syria. With this “red-line” having been crossed, the Obama administration was pressed to implement a “no-fly” zone, in addition to other more decisive military measures. With strong denials coming from the regime and its allies—most notably, Russia—and the United Nations unable to independently corroborate the administration’s findings, the United States faced a number of unattractive options. American and European policy makers still felt that the risk of arms and financial support falling into the hands of al-Nusra was very real. Thus a dual policy emerged, with the main U.S. focus remaining on a political solution in concert with Russia, while simultaneously providing significant financial assistance to the SNC and small arms to opposition forces via the Supreme Military Council (SMC). However, these efforts had
the unintended effect of deepening the splits within the opposition, and also exposed the limits of Russian support for the diplomatic process (in comparison to its expanded military support for Assad).

In frustration over enlarged Russian support for the regime, in early 2014 the U.S. announced a further $200 million in aid to the FSA, with additional weaponry distributed via the SMC. Britain and France followed suit. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and Qatar increased arms shipments to the opposition, knowing that these arms often found their way into the hands of al-Nusra. This influx temporarily limited infighting among the rebels, with an implicit agreement between nationalists and al-Nusra resulting in a new offensive push against Assad’s forces in the summer of 2014. The intensity of the fighting overwhelmed neighboring Iraq and Lebanon with refugees, where 250,000 and 450,000, respectively, had already arrived.xxxiv Refugee numbers in Jordan and Turkey, already at crisis levels, also increased. The U.S. and Europe pledged $100 million to each of these allies to help mitigate the refugee crisis and deter unilateral intervention.

By the end of 2014, four years of sustained fighting had decimated Syria’s infrastructure outside of Damascus. Significant devaluation of the currency and ever-increasing sanctions had effectively destroyed the traditional economy in Syria. Hyperinflation left the Syrian pound worthless, with the U.S. dollar traded freely throughout the country, including Damascus. The black market flourished and a wartime economy replaced all previous economic structures. Those with access to resources across porous borders had established booming businesses providing everything from basic essentials to small arms and body armor, becoming rich in the process and hiring militias to protect themselves and their property.

2015-2016: External Actors Step Back

By early 2015, the stark humanitarian crisis in Syria had worsened considerably. The UN announced that death tolls in Syria had surpassed 200,000, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that the total number of displaced refugees had climbed beyond 2.5 million. Few civilians were left in the northern regions of the country, as those who had not yet fled took up arms and joined the fighting.

The spring of 2016 ushered in one of the most violent, bloody periods of fighting in the entire conflict. Assad’s forces, largely withdrawn from the north, finally secured the city of Homs and fortified their defenses around Damascus. Rather than retreating to the north as expected, however, the opposition forces shifted their attention west, toward the Alawite mountains. Whether out of pre-planned strategy or desperation, the opposition mounted a full-scale offensive attack on the city of Tartus. Suicide attacks within the city killed dozens daily, while scores of Alawite
civilians were butchered in assaults throughout the surrounding areas. Significantly, a suicide attack on the Russian naval facility in Tartus killed three people, including a Russian national. Assad retaliated by unleashing an all-out air assault on Aleppo and Idlib, destroying the meager infrastructure remaining in those once-proud cities. Reports emerged once again of chemical weapons used on Sunnis by Assad’s forces. By the end of August, it had become difficult to estimate the overall death toll, as starvation and a lack of clean water contributed to civilian deaths as much as the ramped-up violence. Estimates varied widely, ranging between 250,000 and 325,000.

Throughout the international community, leaders saw this rapid deterioration as a turning point. Moscow was forced to recognize that its expanded military support for the regime had produced more bloodletting without guaranteeing the regime’s hold on western Syria or the security of its naval base at Tartus. The United States also acknowledged that many of its fears regarding increased lethal aid had become realized. Additionally, Russia and the U.S. were both concerned about the increasing blowback to their relationship from their competitive interventions in Syria. Russia quietly agreed to once again meet with U.S. and European leaders, and proposed an informal understanding. Russia would cap its military and financial support to Assad, in exchange for U.S. and European commitments to refrain from providing further lethal assistance to the opposition. Russia agreed to exert a restraining influence on Iran, as did the West on the Gulf states and Israel. The group also agreed to work towards a cease-fire. The Russians also insisted that any unilateral military action against Syria would be an unacceptable violation of its sovereignty and negate the agreement.

The understanding strengthened incentives and pressures for restraint within the region. Iraq, Jordan and Turkey were still unable and now even less willing to act decisively inside Syria. Iraq, plagued by internal conflicts between Sunni and Shiite factions, did little but absorb refugees and react to political and military challenges at home. Increasing economic woes also prevented Jordan from taking a greater role in the Syrian conflict. Turkey continued experiencing internal conflict; the small political and anti-government protests that started in 2013 had solidified into a widespread movement, causing significant turmoil, slowing Turkey’s bid for EU member status, disrupting its negotiations with the PKK and imperiling Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s political future. These factors had led Turkey’s leadership to rely more and more on its NATO partners, as it moved away from increased involvement in Syria.

The Gulf states continued supplying opposition forces, but the level of violence, Russia’s efforts to restrain Iran and U.S. pressure caused them to be less obvious in their support of the rebels, while publicizing new efforts to strengthen the SNC.

Lebanon bore the brunt of the refugees and faced internal political turmoil, as sectarian tensions escalated within its own borders. Clashes between pro-Assad Hezbollah
forces and anti-Assad Sunni Islamists in the streets of Tripoli meant that goods and fighters sent across the border steadily dwindled.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

Meanwhile, Israel escalated its attacks on convoys within Syria. Focused on limiting arms transfers to Hezbollah and minimizing Iranian supplies headed to Islamic factions, including those in Iraq, Israel made it known that an attack on it by Assad's forces or its proxies would result in military strikes against the regime. This tough talk, in turn, spurred threats from Moscow that unilateral action by Israel or any Western ally would nullify the U.S.-Russian deal. Israel responded by dialing back its threats against Assad, turning its attention instead to Hezbollah and Iran's newly restarted nuclear program.

Iranian Republican Guard Forces continued to fight in Syria, supplementing Assad's troops. With Hassan Rouhani's election as president in 2013 and the introduction of a less confrontational foreign policy agenda, however, the Iranian leadership privately communicated to Assad that, while it remained a staunch ally and would continue providing weapons and supplies, it would not provide any more soldiers due to renewed talks with the United States regarding its nuclear program.

As the winter of 2016 settled in, all sides within Syria were exhausted, and with external support reduced, an informal cease-fire took hold. Scattered violence continued throughout the country, but without the pitched battles that had raged throughout the summer. In Damascus, Assad made his first public appearance in over two years, giving a speech in which he once again vowed to crush the rebels. Yet the speech was followed by a parade through the streets of the city attended by President Rouhani, which suggested to many that the lull in violence was considered a victory and Assad would be content with the cease-fire, at least for the time being. In the north, there was relative quiet as well. FSA leaders and al-Nusra disagreed about how the territory under their control should be governed, yet these differences rarely exploded into violence. In fact, the cities in the north were so badly damaged from years of fighting and few inhabitants remained, rendering the question of governance largely abstract.

2017-2018: Collapse

2017 was a year filled with relative optimism, largely due to the new, informal cease-fire. Outside actors slowly began sending money and humanitarian aid to northern Syria. Despite the still difficult conditions, weary Syrians left overcrowded and dangerous refugee camps to return to what was left of their homes. International NGOs were permitted to move freely throughout the north, providing food and water to desperate people. The NGOs operated primarily in and around urban centers where the FSA had a large presence and could provide protection. Cities where al-Nusra had established control saw slower returns of displaced people, yet the well-funded jihadist militias were able to supply basic needs to those who did return, recruiting some to their cause. In more rural areas, independent militias claimed communities as their own and...
warlords set up mini-fiefdoms. These isolated pockets were not aligned with either the FSA or al-Nusra.

In Damascus, Assad continued to speak out against the “illegal” actions of the rebels and pointed to the free movement of Western NGOs within the country as proof that the rebellion was a plot hatched by imperial Western forces to steal his country. Still, he kept the cease-fire and spent his time refortifying and rebuilding Damascus. As the relative calm stretched on and refugees continued to return, signs of modest economic growth began to appear. Significantly, many young men who had joined the fighting began to lay down their arms and return to their homes. The fighters who remained, both with al-Nusra and the FSA, tended to be more radical.

The international community, attempting to take hasty advantage of the unstable cease-fire, renewed efforts to broker talks of a negotiated settlement. Representatives from the UN and the Arab League arranged to convene leaders of the SNC and representatives of Assad’s regime at a major summit in Cairo in January 2018. No representative from al-Nusra or any Islamist faction was invited to participate in the talks.

Ahead of this summit, SNC President Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib made his first trip to Syria since he had fled in July 2012. The trip was intended to secure the support of on-the-ground forces. While touring northern cities, Khatib met with leaders of the FSA and al-Nusra. He sought to reassure the Islamists that their concerns would be represented at the upcoming negotiations, and promised all parties that Assad would be forced to answer for his crimes. Not long after his arrival in Syria, a roadside explosive killed several members of the SNC delegation, including Khatib. While not taking credit for the assassination, al-Nusra leaders dismissed the advisability of any negotiations with Assad, as condemning Khatib and the SNC as traitors to the cause.

Almost instantaneously, the north erupted into all-out sectarian fighting. Any optimism with which the year had begun was gone, as 2017 concluded in utter chaos. The YPG and other Kurdish groups, also unhappy at being left out of the planned negotiations, took the opportunity to reassert themselves, attempting to stake out an independent Kurdish territory. Turkey reacted by firing missiles into northern Syria, a move that received strong condemnation from the United States. This, in turn, flared
tensions among Turkey, Israel and the U.S. Ankara insisted that Washington had set a double standard by acquiescing to Israeli military actions, while criticizing Turkish efforts to protect its own interests. Russia declared Turkey’s response a violation of the 2016 agreement and considered the possibility of renewed arms shipments, including anti-aircraft missiles to Assad.

With the north in disarray and no legitimate leader representing the opposition, the Cairo talks were called off. As refugees once again fled the fighting, regional actors reassessed their positions. Jordan and Iraq bore the brunt of this new wave of refugees. The leadership of both countries indicated that they could no longer accommodate more refugees and would be forced to intervene if these conditions persisted. Iraq in particular expressed its growing concern by threatening some form of action, as many officials in Baghdad feared that Iraqi Sunnis would find common cause with Sunnis fleeing Syria, possibly laying the foundation for an internal uprising. To assuage these fears, the U.S. Secretary of State met with the Iraqi Prime Minister and King Abdullah II of Jordan. The outcome of these talks resulted in both countries receiving massive aid packages from the U.S.

Assad, who had initially believed that increased infighting and warlordism in the north only helped to secure his legitimacy, began to view this chaos as increasingly problematic. Almost weekly, bombings and IEDs plagued security forces in Damascus. These attacks carried on throughout the summer and fall of 2018. Alawites rallied behind Assad, fearing retribution and ethnic cleansing should he fall. To guarantee his safety, Iran provided greater security assistance and aid, while Hezbollah once again increased manpower on the ground.

With no semblance of cohesion among the opposition and Assad once again receiving support from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, 2018 ended with a dwindling set of unattractive options for the United States: arming the shattered remnants of the FSA (knowing that these weapons were likely to fall into the hands of al-Nusra and other radical factions); taking military action in the form of air strikes or the introduction of ground forces; or allowing Assad and his allies to gain in strength.
SCENARIO 3: NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This scenario begins, as others do, with the current stalemate, competition among outside actors for influence in Syria, all sides with options for escalation, growing territorial fragmentation and political radicalization. Getting from here to a negotiated settlement presents obvious challenges. The easiest paths to serious negotiations would be decisive military victory for one side and an essentially imposed settlement, or a de facto territorial partition ratified and maintained by international agreement. Decisive military victory, however, is unlikely (despite recent regime gains), as each apparent advantage is eventually matched by escalation from the other side. The complexities of a sectarian settlement, the resilience of the regime and divisions among the opposition and between outside powers militate against an enforceable partition. Thus, this scenario depends upon a subtle and potentially transitory shift in the power balance that creates sufficient incentive for most parties to negotiate, and that enables timely outside pressure towards this end to be effective.

Internal Sunni conflict between the Western-backed FSA and Islamist militias prevents the opposition from translating the regime’s weakness in manpower into sustainable military or political advantage. With neither side able to pursue a decisive military victory, the international community has a momentary opportunity to leverage negotiations between Syrian actors with international participation. This would most likely require Security Council consensus on a cease-fire, interim territorial arrangements, an international presence and a process of talks between a unified (but probably unrepresentative) opposition and a post-Assad Baathist regime. Reduced-scale internal violence continues, but the tenuous cease-fire holds and the outlines of a political and territorial settlement begin to emerge.

Spoilers abound in this scenario. A major U.S. and European role in brokering such a deal rules out a seat at the table for Jabhat al-Nusra, who would be incentivized to continue the fight and would have to be blunted on the ground through ongoing counterterrorism operations by outside powers, a task they are currently unwilling
to assume. The role of other radical Sunni militias is problematic, and these groups’ external supporters would have to see benefit in restraining them in the interests of regional stability and their own security. Hezbollah is a major challenge, but in this scenario is looking to cut its losses and refocus on core interests in a fragmenting Lebanon. Iran would have to be convinced that both the Syrian regime taking shape and the envisioned territorial settlement advances its security needs better than open-ended support for Assad. Russia, too, would have to acknowledge these same realities, with assurances that its interests are respected in an opposition-governed Syria.

THE PATH TO 2018
2013-2014: Escalated Stalemate

In early 2013, Syria’s raging civil war surpassed the two-year mark. Competitive intervention by outside actors, through local proxies and, in some cases, the insertion of forces, had escalated the stalemated conflict to the point of all-out sectarian war in Syria, producing a massive humanitarian disaster, compromising the security and stability of an already fragile region threatening the violent unraveling of the regional territorial settlement that had emerged from the First World War. To the reality of regional spillover were added growing concerns about negative effects on relations between the Great Powers, who had begun to question the returns from their support of unreliable local combatants, as their ability to act on important common interests, in the Middle East and elsewhere, continued to suffer.

As the conflict’s third year commenced, the military stand-off between President Bashar al-Assad’s forces and the armed opposition had become deeply entrenched. Momentary advantages enjoyed by one side were trumped by the other’s escalation and enlarged commitments from outside supporters. The expectation of continued external support incentivized local actors to fight on, while the reciprocal nature of this increased assistance deprived any side of a decisive edge on the battlefield. Western self-restraint, a result of the increasing prominence of radical Islamist groups within the opposition, continued to function and permitted transient advantages for the regime, but ultimately yielded to fears that a decisive regime victory would greatly benefit Iran and Hezbollah. Other outside actors faced Great Power pressure or fear of retaliation by regional rivals, but saw greater gain in responding to demands from local allies for upping the ante. Thus, the stalemate held, but at ever-higher levels of violence and without any formal set of restraints.

Major cities and towns, including Damascus, continued to suffer the death and destruction of ever-intensifying urban warfare. The death toll grew to over 90,000, with well over 1.5 million refugees having fled to neighboring countries. The humanitarian crisis strained the international community’s capacity to effectively respond and presented profound challenges to regional infrastructure and
Scenario Three: Negotiated Settlement

Violence between regime forces and armed opposition groups alike escalated, with targeted attacks on high-ranking government officials carried out by Jabhat al-Nusra, a Sunni extremist group affiliated with al-Qaeda, and increasing reports of the Assad government’s use of chemical weapons. This apparent overstepping of the “red line” and questions of “chain of custody” challenged the West’s commitment to a policy of restraint.

Regional backers of both Assad and anti-Assad forces continued to funnel weapons, aid and fighters into Syria, with the hope of tipping the military balance. Despite Western expectations of a shift in policy following the election of Hassan Rouhani as president in Iran, Tehran maintained its unfettered use of Iraqi airspace to transport weapons to pro-Assad military forces, such as Jaysh al-Sha’bi, a coalition of Shiite and Alawite militia groups trained by Hezbollah and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Continued Russian shipments of anti-aircraft cruise missiles to regime forces greatly complicated any potential Western military intervention and reaffirmed Moscow’s commitment to maintaining Assad’s reign in order to protect its geopolitical influence in the region. These arms shipments harmed relations between Russia and the U.S. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, continued to channel weapons and other light arms purchased from Croatia to opposition forces. During 2013, the U.S. and Europe became major sources of light arms to the opposition. Additional funding, communications equipment and other non-lethal aid continued to be provided to the opposition by a host of Western and Arab countries.

Despite manpower constraints, the Assad regime’s forces remained well-funded and armed, while the opposition failed to effectively unite its varied forces’ disjointed offensives under one coherent military strategy. Israeli air strikes targeted at both Assad’s forces and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon served as a harsh reminder of the growing potential for major regionalization of the conflict.

In the early summer of 2013, fighting focused on western Syria. The battle for the city of Al-Qusayr was part of a larger, pivotal fight for the strategically significant city of Homs. For the rebels, the city was tactically important, as it straddles a major transit point for supplies and reinforcements from Lebanon; a rebel victory there had the potential to limit Damascus’ connection to Aleppo and the Alawite-dominated coast, as well as its access to port city supply lines. For the regime, a victory would provide a major morale boost, strengthen its credibility with outside supporters and consolidate its control in western Syria. Due to ramped-up support from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, Assad’s military swiftly prevailed, effectively maintaining control of the city. Russia, in particular, was deeply invested in the regime’s control over western Syria, given its naval base in Tartus. However, after having “conclusively” discovered the use of sarin nerve gas by Assad’s forces in June, the U.S. made a marked shift in policy by extending lethal aid to the opposition. European states, led by Britain and France, followed suit. Nevertheless, as fragmentation within the opposition persisted...
and radical Islamist factions continued to grow in strength, concerns in the West remained over who to support and how to retain control over the lethal assistance provided.

Emboldened by their victory, regime forces sought to push forward in attempts to take the strategically paramount city of Homs. As the battle in the west intensified, plans for diplomatic dialogue between the regime and opposition forces fell apart. Spurred by the opposition’s loss in Al-Qusayr, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, now in concert with the U.S. and Europe, provided expanded help to the opposition with weapons and fighters, allowing it to maintain a viable military resistance. Considerable amounts of weapons and aid shipments did indeed find their way into the hands of extremist groups, which allowed these groups to sustain their military edge within the opposition movement.

The battle for Homs raged on throughout 2014. Presidential elections were postponed indefinitely, as the fight for Homs effectively crippled all political activity within Syria. Fighting was the bloodiest of the three-year war, which had now taken 200,000 lives. With the fighting worsening and the regime seemingly consolidating close to its borders, Israel began to direct its air strikes at Assad’s military bases near Homs, targeting supply routes used by Lebanon-based Hezbollah forces. With Lebanon drawn into the crosshairs, the already refugee-burdened countries of Jordan and Iraq saw an enormous influx of Syrian refugees.

The escalated fighting also led to deteriorating conditions within neighboring Iraq. The threat of internal unraveling forced Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki to reassess his support for the Assad regime. Anti-government movements had gained powerful momentum in and around Baghdad. In order to head off a major Sunni-Shiite conflict in Iraq, Malaki pivoted his focus toward the refugee crisis and imposed a more restrictive policy on the use of Iraqi airspace for Iranian shipments to the Baathist regime in Damascus. The UN, along with the Arab League, the EU and the U.S., encouraged these efforts by pledging to direct humanitarian assistance to Iraq.

Homs had become the epicenter of the Syrian stalemate, both geographically and symbolically. Reports surfaced of another chemical weapons barrage by Assad’s forces against nearby Sunni communities. Israel presented evidence that the attack was actually perpetrated by Hezbollah, and expanded its air strikes against Assad, Hezbollah fighters and Iranian arms shipments. As the battle for Homs approached the six-month mark, both sides’ exhaustion became increasingly apparent. The city was decimated. The sustained fighting had also demolished rural Syria outside of Damascus, virtually crippling all economic activity beyond black market trade. Syria was on the brink of total collapse.

As outside actors, particularly the U.S. and Russia, contemplated the now imminent consequences of worst-case scenarios for Syria and the region, the de facto demarcation
line through Homs offered the potential for a formalized partition and at least the territorial basis for a cease-fire. As the notion of a Baathist southwestern stronghold became increasingly realistic, Russia came to view Assad himself as the major barrier to a longer-term territorial arrangement that might bring some stability to Syria while allowing Moscow to retain its presence within the region. By communicating its willingness to support a successor regime, Russia was able to secure relations with a small, reliable cadre of Baath party officials who shared a similar outlook. To these officials, eliminating Assad was viewed as a viable means of securing their influence in a post-Assad, partitioned Syria that was divided between a debilitated regime in the southern and western parts of the country and a fragmented opposition in the northeast.

2015-2016: Negotiated Territorial Partition

Unlike in the “Contained Civil War” scenario, 2015 opened with most outside actors eager to take full advantage of the opportunity to reinforce the unofficial cease-fire that had emerged. The UN Security Council, now acting with Russian support and Chinese compliance, deployed a peacekeeping force to Syria to incentivize or at least deter opposing sides from undermining the cease-fire. In the wake of Russia’s policy shift and preoccupied with internal social upheaval, Iran focused its efforts on protecting the Baathists’ southern stronghold in order to maintain its arms channel to Hezbollah. Attempts to undermine the cease-fire and thus distract the West’s attention from Iran’s own nuclear pursuits were tempting, but viewed more as potentially spoiling the only promising Syrian development of the past five years. However, as in the “Regionalized Conflict” scenario, Hezbollah was adamantly opposed to any cease-fire. Viewing the partition as the first step in the regime’s demise, Hezbollah feared it would be next. Nonetheless, with Russia and Iran now hedging, Hezbollah’s continued resistance failed to effectively destabilize the agreement.

Coming to terms with the official fracturing of the Syrian state presented new threats to stability, as century-old political boundaries dissolved and sectarian enclaves emerged. While Syrians were relieved to find respite from the brutal violence, they were torn between two histories; most had come to embrace the French-drawn borders of Syria as their nation-state, while maintaining geographically complex sectarian allegiances that challenged the state’s unity.xlii While Syrian citizens continued to struggle with these questions, desperation throughout the country created popular support for the partition. The momentum derived from the newfound international consensus drove members of both the post-Assad regime and the leading opposition forces to the table to formalize a Syrian territorial partition. Talks focused on the drawing of an official armistice line that took into account coastal access, as well as tribal and sectarian geographical pockets. Incidents of cross-border fire continued, but the indefinite presence of UN peacekeeping forces deterred most from escalating further, effectively holding at bay any major resurgence of violence.
The regime-led south found this period to be one of consolidation. After four years of fighting, the Baathists suffered from greatly diminished human capacity. This compelled the new leaders of the refurbished party to rely on nearby Hezbollah forces in Lebanon. These allegiances continued to fuel sectarian tensions within Lebanon, an ongoing threat carefully monitored by Israel. Iran also continued to protect the remaining regime stronghold, despite being increasingly preoccupied with internal issues. The SAF suffered rising defections from those who had personal and familial ties in the north, further fragmenting the already weakened army. Consequently, with the help of continued aid from allied countries, the SAF focused on re-securing its forces, resources and bases in the south to protect its new territorial boundaries.

As the dust settled from the peak of the conflict, more than two million refugees began to return from neighboring Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. However, many of these refugees were faced with the prospect of permanent displacement. Sunni communities in the south had no choice but to abandon many of their birthplaces and find new homes in the Sunni-led north. Effectively, a mass exodus of Syrian Sunnis relocated from Damascus and the coastal areas to the north, further complicating the complex dynamics at play within the new territory. Logistically, UN peacekeeping forces, through efforts to maintain safe areas of passage, facilitated the relocation of many of these displaced ethnic groups. Nonetheless, small-scale ethnic expulsion in the south became a frequent danger for minority enclaves. This tactic of ethnic-based, targeted expulsion was also mirrored in the north, with violence being directed against Alawite and Christian communities attempting to relocate in the south.

No longer preoccupied with fighting the regime, the newly established north faced daunting problems. Western and Arab allies of the opposition flooded the region with uncoordinated humanitarian assistance, which mitigated the suffering but also fueled competition between the Western-backed moderate factions and the more radical Islamist sects that were often supported by the Gulf states. With existing diplomatic recognition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces assumed power over the transitional government. Plans for the creation of a more permanent, representative government, including the drafting of a constitution, elections and a process toward establishing a restorative justice system, were outlined by the transitional council, but fell victim to opposition disunity and violent, incessant power grabs.

Among the fragmented opposition coalition, extremist groups still enjoyed considerable public approval. For many Syrians, the well-armed Islamist militias provided the only security against attacks from the south. However, despite the strength of these radical Islamist groups, many former rebels thought to have been associated with various Islamic extremist groups reevaluated their own self-interests amidst the substantially changed environment. Many fighters shifted their affiliation to more moderate forces,
as they were less ideologically motivated and more concerned with self-preservation. With the new territorial arrangements and U.S.-EU backing of moderate groups, opposition fighters who had battled Assad alongside extremist groups shifted their focus to promoting the political future of the north.

2017-2018: Tenuous Settlement

The dawn of 2017, while hopeful, brought new challenges for the Syrian people, who faced a newly divided country that was predicated on a tenuous and complex peace arrangement. Smoldering sectarianism, constantly aggravated by the violent actions of Islamist extremists, fueled protests condemning the partition as another foreign-imposed remaking of Syria. Violence against Alawite and Christian minorities by extremist groups like al-Nusra was a frequent occurrence. The al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist faction, along with other Sunni militants, was unhappy with the “settlement” that was established. They constantly sought to undermine the slow-moving peace process, as well as overturn the loosely maintained cease-fire between the north and the south. Arms shipments continued to find their way to various extremist groups, suggesting that pressure from the West had failed to completely extinguish the Gulf states’ inclination to foment sectarianism. Increasingly so, this allowed groups like al-Nusra to replenish its resources and remobilize.

Continual threats to peace and security by extremist spoilers further contributed to the fragile situation in the north. Infighting and disunity among various groups within the Syrian National Council continued to militate against the nascent political processes of creating a new constitution and planning for elections. Further complicating matters, a Kurdish separatist movement surged in the northwest, with members of various Kurdish militant groups seeking to seize the changed environment as an opportunity to attempt to carve out its own piece of territory near the southern border of Turkey. As events in Iraq seemed to track those in Syria, Iraq’s own Kurdish region erupted, revealing the enduring potential for the conflict in Syria’s new enclaves to influence events outside its borders.

The threat of a protracted civil war or regionalization of the conflict had been mitigated and, despite tensions in both territories, violence between the north and south had diminished.

Emboldened activity from Islamist groups, minority-based violence and internal insecurities drove leaders of the new Baathist regime in the south towards increased dependence on Hezbollah, which amplified Israeli security concerns.

By 2018, Syria as a unified nation had ceased to exist. The threat of a protracted civil war or regionalization of the conflict had been mitigated and, despite tensions in both
territories, violence between the north and south had diminished. UN peacekeeping forces over time were able to suppress violence across the new border, as volatility turned inward within the neighboring territories. It seemed that the greatest threat to peace was in fact infighting and political incoherence in the north. This challenged the West, as its ability to promote moderate groups and leaders had weakened in the absence of an identifiable adversary. Nevertheless, the U.S. continued to direct humanitarian assistance and aid to vetted groups in the north, in hopes that they would continue to gain popular support and legitimacy.

As economic activity in the south accelerated, defections in the north from radical-based groups toward Western-funded moderate organizations increased. Civilians in both territories warily began to relax into their newly afforded sense of security, fragile as it may have been. While spoilers in the north and south persisted, 2018 concluded with the cease-fire intact and a potential political settlement on the horizon.
The current American approach of incremental and reactive escalation—exhibited most recently in a commitment to provide small arms and ammunition to vetted opposition forces, as well as diplomatic efforts to organize a peace process—cannot be assessed on the basis of Syrian/Middle East scenarios alone. Asian and domestic priorities may demand restraint in Middle East policy regardless of how many people die or are displaced inside Syria, how rapidly and extensively the conflict spreads or how many red lines are crossed in the process. The value of the scenarios taken together is not that they dictate policy responses, but that they suggest the shifting balance of costs and benefits associated with alternate courses of action, as the crisis continues to transform the region. Their purpose is to take both wishful thinking and despair out of the policy debate.

The Regionalized Conflict scenario depicts a downside future that was taking shape as the workshop assembled in February 2013, and has gained in plausibility and gravity since then. It should be thought of as the region’s most likely future, given the enlarged role of Hezbollah and the fears this generates in Israel, the deepening refugee crises in Lebanon and Jordan, escalating sectarian conflict in Iraq and expanding commitments of outside powers—Iran, Russia, the EU, the U.S.—to materially support their local allies. The scenario depicts massive humanitarian effects (as of this writing, deaths are estimated at just over 100,000), reignited civil wars in Lebanon and Iraq, a destabilized Jordan, Turkey preoccupied with internal security and increasingly using force to protect its borders, and escalating direct clashes between Israel on the one hand, and Hezbollah, Syria and Iran on the other. Increasing tensions between the U.S and Russia, already evident despite the measured U.S. response, is also a feature of the scenario, and the deepening/broadening of the conflict further exacerbates these tensions. The scenario also questions how long China can remain aloof from a conflict in a region of growing importance to its economic and strategic priorities. This suggests that the Obama administration’s Asian strategy is at risk unless the Syrian conflict can be contained or resolved.

At what point will the potential damage to regional stability and Great Power relations outweigh the risks of more direct participation inside Syria?
Can U.S. interests tolerate this degree of regional turmoil? At what point will the potential damage to regional stability and Great Power relations outweigh the risks of more direct participation inside Syria? Is the U.S capable of protecting its Middle East interests-defense of its allies, prevention of terrorist safe-havens, WMD non-proliferation, containment of Iran, security of oil flows-as the regional map is violently redrawn? Can it do so if the Russia/Iran/Hezbollah/Assad coalition prevails? If other, less damaging outcomes are plausible, as our negotiated settlement and contained civil war scenarios suggest, how can the U.S. deflect the present course of events, which are clearly on a worst-case trajectory, towards these more favorable scenarios? Can it up the ante sufficiently to generate greater leverage with both allies and adversaries without contributing to the destabilizing outcomes it most fears? It is clear that the metastasizing Syrian civil war is a game changer for the region, and possibly for the global system. The management of these shocks is hard to imagine without the presence of American power.

Whether or not the U.S. acts robustly to prevent the worst case, the scenario requires that we imagine U.S. interests and policies in a violently collapsing Middle East. State fragmentation and a regionalization of sectarian conflict may entail some upsides for the U.S., and the direct effects of regional turmoil on American security and prosperity might be minimized. An extended regional conflict between Sunni and Shiite extremists may sap the energy and legitimacy of both; Iran may find the job of managing its interests in a collapsing Syria to be a drain on resources and dangerously provocative to Israel; expanded U.S. support to local actors whose interests are more or less in alignment with America’s could produce an effective regional balance of power without America’s direct participation in the conflict. The surge in American energy production and exports may permit a somewhat more detached posture towards Middle East instabilities. The collateral damage to Great Power relations depicted in the scenario might be contained by formal understandings to avoid worst-case outcomes. While the scenario offers no guarantee that events won’t demand intervention, large-scale use of chemical weapons being the most obvious, the conditions described above may be deemed “good enough” to allow Asian rebalancing and domestic reform to continue unimpeded.

But this is mostly wishful thinking. Without U.S. leverage to shape events, adversaries will be emboldened. Allies will protect their interests by cutting deals, expanding support for Syrian factions of choice or, if they have the capacity, by intervening directly, possibly resulting in state-to-state conflict in the region and inviting intervention by Great Powers. The humanitarian crisis will deepen. The already shaky global economy will suffer as the security of energy trade is compromised. Permanent damage will be done to both the region and the structure of international stability and accountability.

If the worst case is intolerable and a negotiated settlement (the third scenario) is implausible, the Contained Civil War scenario considers whether regional dynamics and the policies of external powers can work together to contain the damage.
As bad as Syria has become, the first scenario demonstrates how much worse it could get. As regional and global actors face the impending reality of a collapsed Middle East, might they, with some encouragement, become more amenable to strategies that require constraints on their behavior? Would these constraints be self-imposed or would they require some formalization? Could the U.S. contribute to this outcome, not by hoping that others imitate its own “light footprint”, but by imposing higher costs on those feeding the conflict, to the point that their calculations change and opportunities are created for damage limitation?

A contained civil war does not require a settlement (see scenario three), but a combination of stalemate on the ground, higher levels of violence that deplete the combatants and restraint among outside powers based on their realization that worst-case risks are increasing, while the returns on their support of favored groups are diminishing. A commitment to this outcome would reflect outside powers’ sense of hopelessness that the fragmented opposition and an intransigent regime can ever be brought to the negotiating table and that containment is the least bad plausible outcome, with some promise of avoiding a regional sectarian conflict. Thus, the violence continues, ameliorated by increased international humanitarian assistance, diminishing over time by informal understandings to limit external arms supplies. The damage already done to Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and to relations among the region’s states, will continue to burden the Middle East for years to come, but the violent dissolution of the post-Ottoman system is prevented, and the negative fallout for Great Power relations is limited. The containment is not complete—much too late for that—but the hemorrhaging beyond Syria and its immediate neighbors is arrested.

This option, and the policies necessary to achieve it, is often lost in a two-scenario debate between the advocates of forceful intervention and a negotiated settlement brokered by the U.S. and cooperating Great Powers. The former approach runs the risk of further escalation and entrapment, while the latter encourages U.S. restraint as others are creating new realities on the ground.

Were the U.S. to adopt containment as the optimum choice, what specifically would this entail? As the scenario narrative argues, Russia would have to tire of its ongoing commitment to an intransigent Assad in an endlessly stalemated civil war. It would have to see opportunities for securing its naval interests in a post-Assad Syria, fear...
spillover of the conflict into its own restive regions and experience real costs associated with growing tensions with the U.S. It would then have to be prepared to join the U.S. in restricting its own and others’ support to the combatants. There is no indication at present that Russia is close to drawing these conclusions. With Assad consolidating his hold on western Syria and the U.S. committed to gradual and contingent escalation, there are no forces at work to change its views. Again, U.S. leverage is essential if we are to avoid worst-case scenarios, whether this leverage is applied to brokering a settlement (scenario three) or to engineering a stalemate that Russia and others understand will not succumb to their next escalation.

The temptation, if the logic of this scenario is accepted, might be to view an imperfectly contained stalemate, achieved by Great Power agreement to starve the conflict, as a prelude to a negotiated settlement. However, the scenario narrative’s end game suggests that trying to push the internal combatants towards political compromise would further destabilize Syria and possibly the region. The regime is unyielding, and has the internal and external sources of support to remain so. The opposition is fragmented, and any serious push towards negotiations will arouse the spoilers. All view the conflict as existential. All sides have regional allies who would fear marginalization in a negotiated settlement. Better to invest in a more modest, but attainable and useful, outcome. This would reflect the sad conclusion that Syria’s nightmare will continue, even that Syria’s days as a sovereign country are numbered, but that a contained civil war is the best we can do, given the lack of internal and regional consensus.

**The Negotiated Settlement** scenario represents the most plausible version of the U.S. administration’s strong preference. The difficulties are evident for all to see: a still powerful regime fighting for its survival, with both internal and external support; a fragmented political and military opposition, with some factions amenable to political solutions, but others violently opposed; regional actors deeply implicated in a proxy war in Syria; and Western states eager to broker a settlement, but unprepared to invest in additional leverage necessary to achieve it. These conditions, if allowed to continue, are among the least conducive imaginable to a negotiated solution. Indeed, they are more favorable to the first scenario or, if Great Powers choose to prevent the worst case, the second. What are the U.S. and its partners prepared to do to create preconditions for a serious negotiation? How can we work effectively and directly on the local antagonists, and on their external enablers, to move from fighting to, mostly, talking?
As presented in the scenario, the negotiations are facilitated by military stalemate along fairly well-defined territorial boundaries. This stalemate is maintained not by the aims of local actors, all of whom continue to seek dominance within Syria, but by the competitive balancing of regional and global players, whose support to all sides prevents the hegemony of any. In this sense, the stalemate is uncoordinated, dynamic and fragile, subject to sudden reversal as internal or outside actors seek a decisive edge on the ground. It produces a disposition among outside actors towards negotiations only as they reach two seemingly contradictory conclusions: neither side will be permitted by other suppliers to gain that decisive edge, and further escalation threatens additional spillover and their own political stability/legitimacy. With no end in sight and the political, economic and human costs mounting, it might be possible for Great Powers to broker a cease-fire and the beginning of a negotiating process leading towards some sort of territorial partition. This is not the political settlement that the U.S. seeks. Indeed, expectations of genuine power sharing may be the enemy of this “good enough” arrangement that stems the bleeding and, if maintained by multilateral forces, could evolve towards genuine political compromise and a Syria with restored sovereignty.

Again, these conditions are not now present. External actors clearly have not concluded that there is a stalemate in Syria or, if one were re-established, that it couldn’t be overturned to their advantage. The U.S., reacting incrementally to a dynamic and uncertain battlefield and trying to calibrate its responses to reinforce the “good” opposition without risking more spillover and another Middle East quagmire, encourages its adversaries to hope that the next escalation will lock in advantages on the ground. While aiming for a stable stalemate and a war-ending deal, the U.S. will have to escalate more rapidly and decisively, even preemptively, in order to fundamentally alter the calculations of the regime’s supporters. It will have to put other actors’ worst-case scenarios in play if it is to gain traction in Syria.
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Map of the Dispute in Syria

Source: www.polgeonow.com
GLOSSARY

FSA – Syrian Opposition’s Free Syrian Army
PYD – Syrian Kurds’ Democratic Union Party
PKK – Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party
SAF – Assad’s Syrian Armed Forces
IRGC – Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
SNC – Coalition of Opposition groups known as the Syrian National Council
YPG – Kurdish Popular Defense Forces
SMC – Syrian Opposition’s Supreme Military Council
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
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