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## AS SYRIA IMPLODES, WILD CARDS EMERGE: MUSLIM BROTHERS, CHEMICAL WEAPONS, SCUDS, OBAMA'S [SHIFTING] "RED-LINE[S]"

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## WHO WILL RULE SYRIA? A DETAILED ASSESSMENT

***Barry Rubin***

[\*Jewish Press\*, Dec.13, 2012](#)

For all practical purposes, President Barack Obama has now recognized the Syrian opposition group as the government of Syria. Specifically, he called them the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people.” The European Union did the same a few days earlier. While this move has little immediate, practical effect, it is enormously interesting for understanding this issue. And it is also yet another

signal that the civil war in Syria is moving into the end-game.

Thank goodness that only happened after the U.S. government switched its allegiance from the Syrian National Council (SNC). That group, basically created by U.S. initiative (implemented by the Islamist Turkish government) was about 100 percent controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood. The new group which Obama recognized, the Syrian Opposition Council, is “only” about 40 percent controlled by the Brotherhood. That means there is at least hope of a non-Islamist regime in Syria....

Ironically, of course, the group recognized as being the true representatives of the Syrian people was largely created due to U.S. and Western patronage and power. While the new Council did arise from discussions among Syrians, of course, this decision shows that as in the nineteenth century the West—Obama Progressives as much as Victorian era imperialists—still tries to control who gets into power in Third World countries. Power politics is still the name of the game; the question is whether that game is well-played.

In the American presidential campaign, Mitt Romney made the little-noted assertion that the United States should put the emphasis on ensuring that moderates win in Syria. That notion is totally alien to the Obama Administration.

The Syrian Opposition Council does not really represent Syrians, not only because those within the country haven't voted but also because this is an external organization with little or no influence inside the country. It also doesn't have the guns. What it will have is control over Western economic aid in future but this Council cannot be expected to be the basis for a post-civil war government.

In sharp contrast to Libya, we know a lot about the Syrian opposition groups and their leading personalities. The problem, however, is to determine the relative military strength of each group.... This situation is made even more complex because so many groups exist and ideology is cut across by the existence of five different ethnic-religious sectors: Sunni Arab Muslims (about 60 percent), Christians and Alawites (about 12-14 percent each); Kurds and Druze.

Will Alawites end up being cut out entirely because that group formed the basis for the Assad regime? Probably. Will Christians end up being cut out almost entirely because that group backed the Assad regime due to fear of the Islamists who now will probably try to cut them out? Probably. Will there be massacres of Alawites and Christians by a victorious opposition, accompanied by tens or even hundreds of thousands of cross-border refugees? Very possibly, yes. Will the Kurds gain autonomy for their home region in the northeast, an autonomy they are ready to defend using armed militias? Very possibly yes...

The ultimate complication in Syria is the existence of six distinctive ideological camps:

Salafist groups allied with al-Qaida. There may be more than 25 such organizations and they also include fighters from a wide variety of European and Middle Eastern countries. These groups have no chance of taking power or even a large share of any future parliament. Their threat is that they would be dangerously disruptive: attacking Alawites, Christians, and also Kurdish autonomists; trying to attack Israel from Syrian territory; fomenting anti-American and anti-Western views or even waging terrorist attacks on Western people and institutions in Syria; and attacking more secularist politicians, women who favor modern ways, etc....

Salafist groups not allied with al-Qaida. Everything said about the al-Qaida linked groups also applies to them except that they might have significant foreign backing from Saudi Arabia (which wants to subvert Muslim Brotherhood power) and they could get a significant share of parliamentary seats if they are able to unite. But this sector, too, is not likely to gain state power.

The Muslim Brotherhood. This is the only truly united group in Syria that has a significant national appeal, a clear agenda, and a disciplined hierarchy. It is backed by Qatar and Turkey, while the Western countries seem to be totally uninterested in countering the Brotherhood's appeal and ambitions. Whatever the relative size of their military forces, they are closer to being an army than the other relatively rag-tag, ad hoc forces. Historically, the Brotherhood has been far smaller proportionately than its fraternal group in Egypt. A Brotherhood takeover of Syria is by no means inevitable but if one had to bet it seems the single most likely scenario. A key issue is whether the Brotherhood can gain hegemony among traditionalist, pious Syrians who have never had anything to do with the Brotherhood organizationally but would approve of a lot of its platform regarding a Sharia-oriented state and rejecting a modern liberal or Arab nationalist approach.

The moderates. There are a lot of liberal forces in Syria, especially among urban Sunni Muslim Arabs who are intellectuals or in business. They are far more sophisticated and skilled than their Egyptian counterparts and they could form alliances with Kurds and Christians also. Unfortunately, the West hasn't helped them very much. They also have some characteristic weaknesses. These include factionalism, a blindness toward the practical political work of mobilizing the masses, problems in communicating with their traditionalist fellows. Most of all, they lack the killer instinct. They don't have guns or militias, and they aren't willing to intimidate or murder their rivals. That can be a fatal shortcoming in an anything-goes post-civil war Syria. Still, this group is the main alternative to Muslim Brotherhood rule....

Local strongmen. This group is important even if it cannot gain power on a national level. Such people are in real control of many areas of the country; they have lots of guns; and they are able to appeal to traditionalist Syrians in rural and small town areas. They are not Islamist and don't want Salafist or Brotherhood cadre to tell them what to do or how to live. But they will have to form alliances to have a wider effect and opportunism might drive them into the Brotherhood's camp.

Defected army officers. These men are the most effective military specialists. They tend to be Arab nationalists. Yet they do not form a political group and won't do so. Their relevance comes from the likelihood that they will form the leadership of the new Syrian army which, down the road, might come to exercise some political influence or even power.

The key to Syria's future state, then, is between two broad blocs—Islamist and non-Islamist—which will work together at least for a while to defeat the remnants of the Assad regime and create a stable new government. The Brotherhood needs to work out something with the Salafists and to build a broad appeal with conservative-traditionalist Syrians and perhaps with local strongmen. The moderates have to learn street politics, win over local strongmen; find a way to split the conservative-traditionalist masses from the Islamists; and work out some alliance with Christians and Kurds without being branded as traitors to Sunni Arab interests.

Not only does the Brotherhood have the easier task but it also can expect more foreign support and money, even possibly from the United States. The battle isn't yet lost but things don't look great.....

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## **ASSAD'S CHEMICAL CARD**

***Tony Badran***

*[Now Lebanon](#), December 13, 2012*

Last week, president Obama issued another warning to Syria's embattled dictator against making the "tragic mistake" of using chemical weapons (CW). There remain a number of real scenarios in which we could see Bashar al-Assad use these weapons down the road. But whether he does so any time soon

or not, Washington's reaction to his latest trial balloon with the CW provided him with the answers he sought at this point. The White House's response has likely, if inadvertently, emboldened Assad to continue to wield the threat of using CW, if not really use them. Here's the strategic upside as Assad sees it.

The Syrian president realizes that his chemical arsenal is the ace up his sleeve. From the beginning of the Syrian revolution, it was amply demonstrated to him that his CW capability separated him from Libyan dictator Moammar Qaddafi. Syria is not Libya, the mantra went. The usual justification pointed to Assad's air defenses, but it's clear that the major reason was precisely Syria's CW stockpile. Assad understood that his deterrent worked. Moreover, Assad figured that as long as he held this card, he would remain politically relevant. This was reinforced by the public messages the Obama administration kept sending him.

Assad's stunt last week wasn't the first time he tested the waters by moving chemical weapons around. In July, US intelligence noted such movement and declared that it would "hold accountable" those responsible. Then, in a curiously worded statement, the administration said that it expected "the Syrian government ... to safeguard its stockpiles." The US position was contradictory. A year earlier Obama said Assad had lost legitimacy and called on him to "step aside." And now the US was asking him to maintain control and safeguard these CW sites.

Assad put his finger on the essential incoherence of Washington's policy. He smelled that the US was still not certain about the endgame in Syria. In as much as the US wanted him to go, it remained uneasy about what would come next. Assad understood, therefore, that Washington had a fear he could exploit, perhaps giving him a bargaining position down the road, as regime-controlled territory contracted.

In addition, this episode proved to Assad that playing around with chemical weapons could grab Obama's attention as it seemed nothing else could, not even the deaths of tens of thousands of Syrians. In other words, Assad figured he had leverage on the US. Up until that point, Obama had made very few statements on Syria. But a month later, in August, the US president directly addressed the situation. Although his comments at the time were viewed as a stern warning to the regime, a closer reading shows why Assad saw an opening to keep pushing.

"We cannot have a situation in which chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people," Obama said. This reinforced the State Department's wording, emphasizing that the problem was not the fact that these weapons were under the control of Assad, a man who had ordered the slaughter of Syrians, facilitated the killing of Americans in Iraq, supported terrorism throughout the Levant, and constructed a secret nuclear arms facility. Rather, the problem was the prospective loss of his control over these arms. Indeed, a senior administration official emphasized to the New York Times that Mr. Obama's warning "was aimed at large-scale transfers of weapons that would make them vulnerable to capture by radical forces, not movements by the government intended to secure the arsenal."

Even Obama's "red line" was not aimed exclusively at Assad, but also at "other players on the ground," presumably those same "radical forces." The red line covered further "moving around" of CW as well as their possible use. But a month later, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that CW were being moved again. However, he added that the regime was relocating them in order to better secure them. So, although Assad had clearly defied Obama's red line, Assad still got a pass, setting the stage for this month's episode.

As observers have noted, this time around, Obama slightly shifted the previous red line, removing any reference to "moving around" CW, as Assad had already crossed that line with no consequence. The

red line now is only about actually using the weapons. There are plausible scenarios in which Assad would use CW in a tactical manner against his domestic enemies—and it's not at all clear that he wouldn't get away with it. Assad will fight tooth and nail to maintain control over Damascus, while also securing the route from Homs to the coast (an area that witnessed regime ethnic cleansing attacks. The CW are Assad's insurance policy to protect his retreat into the [Alawite] coastal redoubt. At the time, some in the administration had a similar reading, placing the potential use of CW in the framework of a "targeted ethnic cleansing campaign" by Assad, and proposed that he could use "the threat of a chemical attack [to] drive Sunnis ... from their homes." Seen this way, CW could work just as well to maintain a grip on Damascus by forcing hostiles out and keeping them out.

It's true that the administration has warned Assad against using CW against his people, but it's doubtful that Assad finds Obama's threat credible. For one, the administration has loudly made it known that securing the CW sites would require 75,000 troops—effectively ruling it out as an option. Besides, Assad has seen Washington ignore other benchmarks—such as the use of fixed winged aircraft, cluster and incendiary bombs, and now apparently Scuds or "Scud-type" missiles—and has probably concluded that Obama is unlikely to send in the cavalry should a few more hundred Syrians perish in a tactical chemical attack.

What's more, Obama has now offered Assad another loophole with the designation of the Jabhat al-Nusra group as a terrorist organization. As soon as news came out that the designation was forthcoming, the regime rushed to claim that rebels had seized control of a toxic chlorine factory in east Aleppo, and may now use these chemicals in an attack. Such bogus stories set the stage for a possible attack in the future and provide Assad, and his backers in Moscow, with enough to muddy the waters....

Assad is banking that the basic parameters of US policy will remain the same. The administration's performance this past week, going back to July, probably reinforced his conviction that not only are his CW a useful bargaining asset, but also that the odds are decent he could get away with it if he used them shrewdly.

*Tony Badran is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.*

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## **DON'T LET THE SYRIAN REBELS WIN**

***Glenn E. Robinson***

*Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2012

It may well be true, as recent news reports tell us, that Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus, increasingly desperate in the face of an unrelenting rebel onslaught, is prepared to use chemical weapons against its own citizens. The Syrian leader himself, all the main power brokers in his government, and virtually all of the country's military officer corps come from a long-persecuted minority that legitimately fears that this war is a matter of "kill or be killed" for the Alawites, who make up around 12 percent of Syria's population. The Alawites left what is now Iraq a millennium ago and settled in the dusty hills of northwest Syria overlooking the Mediterranean. A doubly heretical sect in the eyes of orthodox Sunni Muslims -- as an offshoot of Shiite Islam -- the Alawites lived an isolated existence for centuries as their religion evolved to reflect various folk traditions.

The Alawites have few defenders in the Arab world, both because of the unorthodox nature of their religion and because of the horrible nature of the Baathist regime they have controlled since the 1960s. Nor does it help that they are widely seen as pawns of Iranian interests in the region. The regime's fall

-- which is still far from certain -- will not be widely mourned in the Arab world, outside of Tehran and in Hezbollah circles.

The fall of the House of Assad will likely be celebrated by many in the West. But banking on the well-heeled Syrian expatriate community to come to power for any length of time is a losing bet. The exiles may have won the support of the Obama administration and others, but have little chance of holding power in Syria for any length of time, barring international occupation of the country. And nobody thinks the United States has any appetite to occupy another Arab country militarily, even for a relatively short period of time.

In other words, forget about the expats. The people that will ultimately take power in Syria are the armed men who control the country's streets, villages, and towns right now. They do not speak with a single voice, and are often people just looking to protect their families and communities from the Assads' onslaught. As for the rebel "Free Syrian Army," it is no army at all in the sense of having any kind of command and control over its constituent units.

What about the budding terrorist groups we hear so often about?...There is little evidence that foreign jihadis represent anything more than a sliver of those fighting the Assad regime.

But Syria does not need foreign jihadis and radical Islamists -- it has more than enough of the home-grown variety. This is where people so often miss the nature of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, easily the most coherent political force in Syria's opposition today.... It has been a capital offense to be a member or give any support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria for three decades. As a result, the organization is secretive and opaque, and it's not clear how much its cadres inside the country interact with its exiled leadership....

Neither Syria nor the region would be well served by a decisive victory by either the Assad regime or by the opposition. Breathless supporters of Syria's revolution need to be careful what they wish for....

What, then? It is not fashionable to say so, but a negotiated outcome remains the best solution to end the killing and prevent the worst elements from either side ruling Syria. An outright opposition victory would likely produce a momentary air of euphoria before the steep decline toward autocracy and darkness begin.

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## ON TOPIC

**[Libya Helps Bankroll Syrian Opposition Movement:](#)** *Washington Post*, November 5, 2012—The top financier of the Syrian opposition is no Arabian Peninsula oil kingdom or cloak-and-dagger Western spy outfit, but struggling, war-ravaged Libya, which is itself recovering from a devastating civil conflict.

**[Syrian Opposition Boosted by U.S. Recognition:](#)** *Vivienne Walt, Time World*, Dec. 12, 2012—

With three weeks of fighting in Damascus signaling the accelerating erosion of the Assad regime's control of Syria, Western diplomats are pressing the exiled opposition leadership to take charge of governing rebel-held areas.

**[Syrian Rebels Gain, but for How Long?:](#)** *Alex Rowell & Amani Hamad, NOW Lebanon*, December 7,

2012—The resignation of Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi on Monday is just one of a series of recent setbacks for the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The news follows a week of unprecedented military victories for rebel forces.

**[Russia: Syria's Assad Could Be Defeated By Rebels:](#)** *Michael Birnbaum and Babak Dehghanpisheh,*

*Washington Post*, Dec. 13, 2012—Russia acknowledged for the first time on Thursday that Syrian rebels are gaining in their effort to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad...There was no sign that Russia — Syria's most

powerful patron — would join other foreign nations, including the United States, in supporting the opposition or pressuring Assad to step down.

**Mordechai Kedar: The Division of Syria:** Dr. Mordechai Kedar, *Jeewish Press*, February 21st, 2012—Syria comprises 14 administrative districts that reflect the demographic distribution of the population. Following the collapse of the central government, Syria is likely to be divided up according to its ethnic groups, and this division will be fairly similar to the map of administrative districts: six main districts; the rest will either become independent/autonomous, or some or all of them will be subsumed by one of the [other] groups.

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