

Scenarios

Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP)

February 2013

Scenarios are a description of situations that could occur, a set of informed assumptions about a development that may require humanitarian action. These scenarios can support strategic planning, create awareness, provide early warning and promote preparedness activities for all groups and individuals working on the Syria crisis. The following document covers three scenarios which are likely to occur in the next six months. For every scenario a separate column indicates whether the described event is already taking place. Where possible, the current occurrence of this event is quantified. In addition, three often mentioned, but unlikely, developments are covered. Finally, several lessons learned from similar situations outside of Syria are included.

Driver (either one or a combination of these could result in the materialisation of a scenario, the list is not exhaustive)

- A steady flow of military and financial support results in sufficient military capacities for key armed groups to continue fighting
- While armed opposition groups consolidate control over specific geographic areas, Syria increasingly splinters into Alawite, Sunni, and Kurdish regions with cities divided by sectarian neighbourhoods

- Decreasing popular support for al-Assad regime and significant number of defections of al-Assad's close circle of advisers
- President al-Assad is removed from his post. Although the remainder of the regime continues to govern the country, state authority is significantly diminished
- Anti-Government groups take control of airbases, key Government supply routes, (large parts of) Damascus and other key cities
- International military intervention supporting anti-Government actors

- Allies of the al-Assad regime, not only state actors but also powerful Syrian actors, increasingly move towards anti-Government groups and effectively force the al-Assad Government to negotiate a settlement with opposition groups
- Significant pressure from the United Nations, Arab states or other relevant actors on all parties to the conflict
- All parties lose significant military capacity and popular support, both nationally and internationally, and are thus forced to negotiate instead of continuing the conflict
- Key opposition groups cohere politically
- President al-Assad departs and the remnants of the regime enter into negotiations

Scenarios

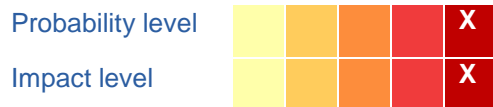
(in order of likelihood)


**Continued fighting/
political and military
fragmentation**


Government collapse

Negotiated settlement

Scenario I: Continuing violence, increasing political and military fragmentation








 Already occurring on a small scale

 Already occurring on a large scale

Summary: Violence continues unabated, while the number of parties to the conflict increases. As anti-Government groups increasingly operate more independently from each other and areas remain without central authority for long periods of time, the country divides into pockets of control following sectarian and ethnic lines. There is a high risk of spill over of violence into Lebanon as well as an increasing presence of armed Islamic groups throughout the region.










Assumptions

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- All parties to the conflict continue to receive funds, logistical support, intelligence and weapons from allied state and non-state actors. 
- The Government continues to control key major cities and Alawite coastal strongholds, while anti-Government groups control large swathes of the rest of the country. Fighting continues around hot spots, including Aleppo, Dar'a, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs and Idleb. As the capacity of anti-Government groups to wage a war in the capital increases, Damascus becomes a key battleground. In addition, battles around important infrastructure, such as weapon depots, airbases and petroleum stages expand (see map page 7). 
- Authority becomes concentrated locally, as communities self organise politically and economically. Some communities establish military groups as a defence mechanism or to contest the group controlling the area, for instance within those villages under de facto control of hard-line Islamist insurgents. 
- As the conflict proceeds, more independent armed groups are formed, with fast-changing alliances between them. Fighting amongst these groups increases as groups are fighting over control of areas and resources. Diverging interests amongst and within armed groups will be fuelled by private funds flowing to different commanders. 
- Continued fighting will lead to radicalisation and as a result, more moderate groups will resort to using heavy weaponry on populated 

Impact

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- A high humanitarian caseload results, with a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in areas affected by fighting and those hosting large numbers of IDPs.  At least 4 million people are in need of assistance
- Continuation of heavy fighting in populated areas leads to destruction of a large part of the key infrastructure  Much infrastructure is already affected (i.e. 54% of public hospitals damaged or destroyed)
- Fighting is widespread, with quickly changing frontlines. As a result, access to the few functioning health facilities is severely disrupted, and there is a general shortage of medicines, health supplies and personnel. This will increasingly lead to disease outbreaks. 
- Livelihood opportunities are significantly decreased, as people lose access to agricultural lands, and destruction of infrastructure and factories hinders trade and services.  Unemployment has risen from 9% in 2010 to 25% in September 2012
- As domestic supply routes are blocked and agricultural production decreases, the population increasingly relies on cross-border trade for food commodities. Possible unrest in Lebanon makes the flow of trade across the Syrian-Lebanese border, currently an important supply route, more difficult. 
- Significant inflation as continued fighting and economic sanctions results in a further deterioration of the economy, increased prices and a decreasing availability of products.  Both general and food inflation are alarmingly high: CPI increased by 27% from Jan-Sep 2012
- Heavy fighting, displacement, lack of material, and Government cuts leads to a further deterioration of water supply, particularly in urban areas.  Water access has severely decreased (e.g. localities of Deir-ez-Zor mains water provision has decreased by 90%)
- Lack of law and order due to erosion of Government authority and collapse of state apparatus in rebel controlled areas results in increasing numbers of reprisals, revenge killings, sectarian violence, and an intensification of gender based violence and human rights violations. 
- Increase in black market activities and criminal activities, partly as a result of the lack of state control and partly to obtain resources. 

- As fighting continues in urban areas, particularly Damascus, more urban-rural displacement occurs and neighbouring countries see an increase in daily refugee arrivals. Alawites, Christians, Druze and other minorities fearing retribution move to regime-controlled areas and neighbouring countries.
- Areas, not actively contested, see some form of *normality* with Government, local community, or the controlling anti-Government group providing key services.
- When conditions allow, an increased return to 'safe areas' from other areas within Syria occurs.
- **Impact on regional refugee situation:** The daily number of refugee arrivals to neighbouring countries increases significantly as fighting intensified. A possible battle for the city of Damascus will cause a large influx of refugees in a short period of time to Lebanon and Jordan, further straining resources of host communities. The Government of Jordan has on multiple occasions stated that it will close its borders if the influx of refugees will exceed the capacity of the services in Jordan. Without sufficient support, it is likely that the Government will prevent more Syrians from seeking refuge in Jordan. As a result, more Syrians flee to governorates bordering Jordan and in Lebanon. As northern Lebanon becomes more and more saturated, the shortage of available houses and lack of livelihoods opportunities forces secondary displacement to other areas of the country. In Turkey and Iraq, continuing (and possibly increasing) influx of refugees necessitate the establishment of additional camps. Resources of refugees residing outside camps are increasingly depleted and, lacking sufficient support, refugees are forced to relocate to the camps. Refugee returns to areas in Syria considered safe continue at present rates.



Access

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- Political and military fragmentation leads to an increasing establishment of checkpoints and local militia, impeding transport and access. Areas controlled by hard-line Islamic groups or where intense fighting persists are almost completely inaccessible.
- A scale-up of humanitarian operations is enabled in areas with low conflict intensity.
- Widespread destruction of and damage to key infrastructure hampers transport of relief goods.
- With local trade and production systems breaking down, agencies need to source almost all aid commodities on the international market to relieve pressure on the weak national market.
- Fighting in and around Damascus could necessitate the evacuation of essential international humanitarian aid workers.
- Access to Damascus based warehouses and supply routes will be blocked.



Priority concerns









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- Humanitarian needs continue to escalate with large pockets of unmet needs, particularly in areas witnessing heavy fighting. Given the large-scale destruction of homes and infrastructure, shelter is a high priority until winter ends in late March. Food assistance and the provision of health and WASH services are also priorities.
- Populations trapped in conflict areas with heavy fighting face protection risks, limited freedom of movement and lack of access to services including humanitarian assistance. Protection needs throughout the country will have to be addressed, including possible reprisal killings, sectarian violence, sexual and gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, right of refugees and IDPs to return, property rights, etc.
- Treating and evacuating the wounded continues to be a key priority.
- In areas with sporadic fighting, humanitarian assistance in all sectors is necessary until livelihoods have been re-established, both for IDPs and the non-displaced population.




Scenario II: Chaotic transition after Government collapse

There are several scenarios possible after the Government collapses, including a successful transition and a period of calm followed by widespread unrest. However, the scenario outlined below is more likely as the Syrian National Coalition remains divided and reportedly has little influence on the conduct of rebel groups on the ground.

Probability level				
Impact level				

 Already occurring on a small scale

 Already occurring on a large scale

Summary: After the Government collapses, the Syrian National Coalition is unable to lead a successful transition to a democratic state. The fall of the regime takes a significant part of state institutional support with it. With a weak central authority, some areas of the country remain de facto ruled by former opposition groups or local committees: Alawite and Kurdish strongholds strive for (semi-)autonomy. Violence continues, albeit at lower levels compared to the current situation as the main antagonists, the FSA and the Syrian Government Army, are no longer fighting. Reconstruction efforts are severely hampered by on-going violence, weak state institutions as well as by the damaged infrastructure.

Assumptions

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- Anti-Government groups are able to overthrow the Government due to the occurrence a combination of several of the following events:
 - Ability of anti-Government groups to control key strategic points and (parts of) the city of Damascus, as a result of a boost in capacity through international support or capturing of weapon depots.
 - Opening of Jordanian borders to trade, facilitating the flow of weapons and support to anti-Government groups in the south.
 - International intervention supportive of the FSA takes place.
 - Establishment of a no fly zone.
 - President al-Assad is removed from his post.
 - Significant number of al-Assad's close circle of advisers defect.
 - Decrease of popular support to the Baath regime, partly caused by the inability of the Government to pay salaries to 2+ million civil servants.
 - Diversion of Government resources to an armed conflict with Israel.

- After the Government collapses, a weak Sunni-led Government takes over, leaving little or no room for Alawites, Christians and Druze minorities.
- The new caretaker Government dissolves the ruling Baath party and starts to restructure the armed forces, security agencies and the *shabiha*.
- Lack of a coherent political agenda and unified chain of command impedes the effectiveness of the transitional Government and planning of elections.
- Without effective central authority, communities increasingly rely on community based governance systems or power structures based on armed groups and warlords.
- Although the Syrian National Coalition will request all militant groups in Syria to disarm, anti-Government groups not supportive of the Syrian National Coalition, including Kurdish communities, take advantage of the period of uncertainty in Syria's governance, continuing to use violence to pursue their goals. In addition, guerrilla elements loyal to al-Assad stage attacks on key infrastructure (see map page 7).
- The Syrian National Coalition does not succeed in reviving the secular nationalist identity and sectarian tensions within Syria's society increase. This threatens the position of Alawites and other minorities and sharpens the Sunni-Shia divide.
- In addition to increasing tensions amongst different Syrian groups, unrest between Palestinian factions arises due to shifting power balances and alliances.

Impact

Feb 2013

- Large parts of Syria come under some form of central authority without active fighting and the monthly death toll significantly decreases, encouraging significant return of IDPs and refugees.
- As security improves in many areas, the nature of the humanitarian caseload changes to support return and recovery activities.
- State institutions are weakened by months of conflict and deep-seated fear and mistrust among Syria's population as a result of the civil war. Dissolving the Baath party and its affiliated institutions and cleansing the bureaucracy and security apparatus of former Assad loyalists leads to a partial collapse of the state apparatus.

- As a result, the new Government is unable to provide basic services and reconstruction efforts are significantly delayed.
- Lack of political representation of minorities exacerbates discontent amongst different groups, increasing the risk of sectarian violence. A focus on revenge and the lack of a transitional justice mechanism cause difficulties of reconciliation. Widespread human rights violations continue, including torture, summary executions, gender based violence and targeted attacks.
- Overhaul of the security sector risks the safeguarding of conventional and chemical weapons. This development might trigger an international intervention (see page 6, international intervention scenario).
- Restructuring the intelligence apparatus forces former military and security personnel into unemployment, increasing security threats.
- The power vacuum and lack of law and order leads to continuation of black market activities and criminal activities, including looting, robberies and arms smuggling undermining civil order.
- Widespread human rights violations continue, including torture, summary executions, gender based violence and targeted attacks.
- The economy is boosted by the lifting of sanctions, international support for development programmes, resumption of normal cross-border transactions, and repairs to infrastructure. However, economic development stalls due to on-going violence and targeted attacks on key economic infrastructure radical elements seeking to undermine the transition.
- The current private sector structure, consisting of a business elite with extreme loyalty to the regime, collapses. Due to on-going insecurity, the brain drain which occurred during the conflict is only partly restored as only some of the entrepreneurs and academics who have fled Syria return.
- **Impact on regional refugee situation:** The overall refugee numbers gradually diminish as many (predominantly Sunni) refugees return to Syria while other minority groups inside Syria leave, fearing reprisals.



Access

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- Humanitarian access increases significantly, with more humanitarian actors allowed to operate throughout the country, increased availability of goods and significant increase in geographic areas accessible.
- Reconstruction of infrastructure facilitates humanitarian access.
- Some areas outside of the control of the transitional Government remain inaccessible due to localised fighting and general insecurity.









Priority concerns


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- While livelihoods and services are re-established, emergency and recovery interventions are pressing needs, including shelter, food, WASH and health support. Reconstruction of basic infrastructure is a priority.
- After two years of conflict and widespread human rights violations, psychosocial support to the affected population is a pressing need
- The provision of legal aid, to address reconciliation and land and property issues, is a priority need.
- Support to returnees, including livelihoods support and reconstruction of shelter and basic infrastructure is of key importance.



Scenario III: Negotiated Settlement

Probability level		 X		
Impact level		 X		

 Already occurring on a small scale

 Already occurring on a large scale

Summary: After the Government and a critical mass of opposition groups have been persuaded to negotiate, a settlement is reached. Within this settlement, President al-Assad is forced to withdraw, leaving the Government in the hands of a combination of representatives of opposition groups and former regime officials. The main difference between this scenario compared to scenario II, a Government collapse, is the fact that under a negotiated settlement, a large part of the state structures remain operational.

Assumptions

Feb 2013

- As a result of pressure from the opposition and part of the international community, President al-Assad steps down.
- Together with representatives of opposition groups, remaining regime officials maintain control of the majority of state institutions and focus on restoring disrupted services.
- In light of the current conduct of the Syrian Armed Forces, a complete overhaul of the security forces is deemed necessary.
- Disarmament of armed groups is not fully effective and discontent among different groups, including within the Syrian National Coalition, leads to localised fighting, particularly in periods preceding important political events such as elections. Until the Syrian Armed Forces have been effectively restored, militant groups rule pockets of the country.
- Cooperation between members of opposition groups and former regime members is limited, paralysing government systems.

Impact

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- As the intensity of fighting decreases, and the general security situation significantly improves, large-scale refugee return takes place in a short period of time and many IDPs (currently 2 million people) return to their places of origin.

- This rapid influx of returnees changes the nature of the humanitarian caseload from refugees and IDP assistance to support to return and recovery activities.
- The weak law and order system following the transition is unable to suppress widespread criminality and localised human rights violations, including gender based violence and acts of revenge and sectarian violence.
- State institutions have been weakened by two years of war and displacement of technical staff. While reconstruction is on-going, access to services such as water and health care remains limited.
- The return of entrepreneurs and foreign investment, boost economic capacity and reconstruction efforts.
- **Impact on regional refugee situation:** The overall number of refugees rapidly diminishes as many refugees return to Syria. Some refugees from minority groups remain outside Syria until security and law order returns to an acceptable level.



Access

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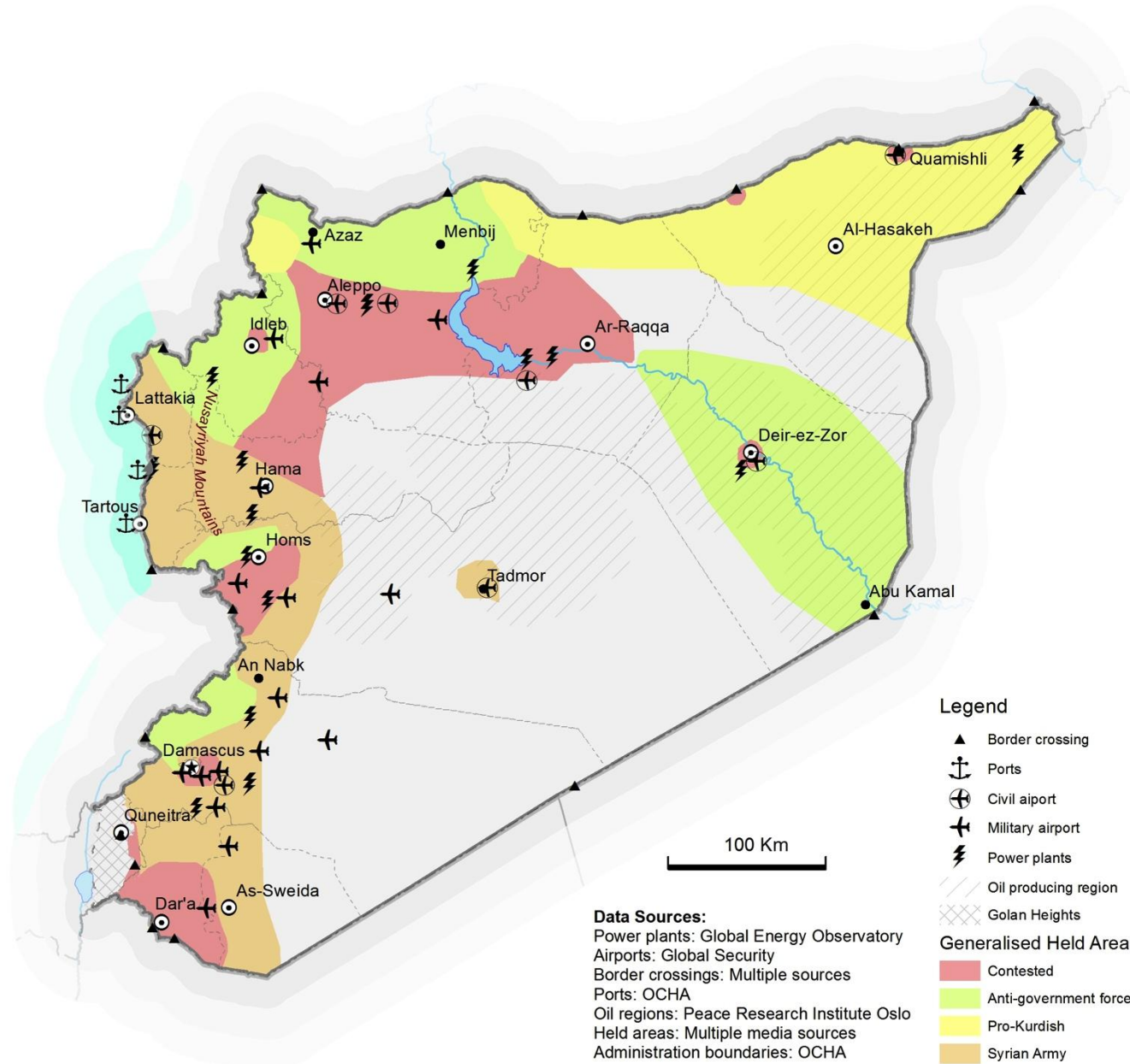
- Humanitarian access increases significantly with almost all areas accessible to humanitarian operations
- General insecurity and localised violence impede humanitarian access in specific regions

Priority concerns

Feb 2013

- While livelihoods and services are re-established, emergency and recovery interventions are urgent, including shelter, food, WASH and health support. 
- Protection remains a key concern, fuelled by the lack of legal redress mechanisms. 
- Psychosocial support to those affected by the conflict is a key priority.
- Support to returnees, including livelihoods support and reconstruction of shelter and basic infrastructure is a pressing need.

Current areas of control and strategic economic and military infrastructure



Unlikely scenarios

Three developments have been mentioned as possible consequences of the current crisis: an international intervention, the establishment of an independent Alawite state, and the victory of Syrian troops over anti-Government groups. However, these scenarios seem unlikely to materialise within the next six months for a variety of reasons. The following paragraphs explain the background of these developments and the rationale for assigning a low probability.

International intervention

Background

Talks of an international intervention, in the form of a no-fly zone, a humanitarian corridor or a peace keeping mission have continued for the last 2 years. Currently, the complexity of the crisis, its regional repercussions, the deadlock at the UN and the projected costs of military operations have deterred most western states from intervening.

Although a 'no fly zone', following the example in Libya in 2011, has been often mentioned as a suitable alternative to a ground invasion, states are unwilling to pursue this option. Syria has a high population density (more than 30 times greater than in Libya), and therefore there is a risk of a high number of civilian casualties. In addition, Syria owns a significant stock of anti-aircraft weaponry.

In light of Russia's rejection of three previous Security Council resolutions, it is unlikely that a Security Council resolution approving an international intervention will be implemented during the first half of 2013. Without such a resolution, there are few states willing to intervene militarily. The only exception is Israel, who launched air strikes on Syria at the end of January, allegedly to halt transportation of weapons intended for Hezbollah.

The Syrian Government could request military support from its allies Russia or Iran, similar to the recent request from Mali to France to help defeat rebels in northern Mali. However, neither Russia nor Iran has, until now, shown willingness to support the al-Assad regime in this way.

Triggers:

The situation would change in favour of an intervention should the UN adopt a legal mandate for intervention based on an Arab request, if the Assad regime resorts to use of chemical weapon or a significant spill over of the conflict to neighbouring countries takes place. In addition, a resolution will be possible if Russia and China pursue a more favourable approach towards the anti-Government groups in Syria and abstain from voting during a Security Council resolution, similar to what happened in Libya in 2011.

The conflict dynamics, and thereby the possibilities for an international intervention, would significantly change if Israel launches further airstrikes.

Establishment of independent Alawite state

Background

Some analysts indicate that after the Government is ousted from Damascus, it will retreat to its stronghold in the west. In this scenario the regime manages to establish a state with support from remnants of the Syrian army and international allies Russia and Iran. Local media reports of the regime moving weapons to the area and of targeting of non-Alawite groups in Lattakia and Tartous support these assumptions. However, numerous reports have categorised this development as unlikely, for the following reasons:

- There is a significant non-Alawite population in the designated area, comprising for instance an estimated 50% of the city of Lattakia. The establishment of an Alawite state would require mass forced displacement or ethnic cleansing.
- Sunni anti-Government groups have continuously strived to gain control of the region, particularly as the major ports of Tartous and Lattakia are situated here.
- The region has no separate economy of its own and is not endowed with substantial natural resources or other economic and industrial advantages.
- Apart from its international allies Iran and Russia, there are few states that would recognise and support an Alawite state in Syria.

Trigger

- Iran or Russia show willingness to support and invest in an Alawite state both financially and military.
- Deep factionalism and lack of unification significantly decrease the capacity of anti-Government groups to deter the establishment of an Alawite state.

Government defeats anti-Government groups

Background

Both Russia and Iran, staunch allies of the Government, have indicated that it is unlikely that the Syrian Government will defeat the rebels militarily. As Government forces are losing more territory, the number of militant factions is increasing and the financial resources of the Government are dwindling (due to the deteriorating economy, international sanctions and the costs of fighting different groups) a victory of the Government over anti-Government groups is unlikely.

Triggers

- Widespread inter-oppositional conflict significantly decreases military capacity of anti-Government groups.

- Anti-Government forces lose popular support, both within Syria and internationally.
- Flow of resources, including financial, technical and military, to anti-Government groups recedes.
- Government receives significant support from its allies and reasserts control of key strategic areas.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned have been derived from other regional conflicts or similar situations in the past.

- War economies, as currently fostered by fighting groups, such as the FSA, jihadists and the counter-insurgent shabiha, are likely to be perpetuated beyond truces or peace deals, and to re-emerge in the form of organized violence and crime, as in Balkans and Iraq.
- Territorially fragmented governance (e.g. warlords and enclaves), or systems of power which rest on ethno-sectarian divides that opened up during conflict, are difficult obstacles to overcome.
- Dismantling warring parties, which have grown attached to violent and criminal means of survival, stands as one of the main concerns for transition planning. Evidence from Iraq, Afghanistan and Central America confirms the devastating effect on state legitimacy and normal economic life of a wave of insecurity and crime following the end of major armed conflict. Unemployment amongst former combatants fuels this insecurity and crime.
- Removal of previous civil servants and destruction of government offices, such as occurred during the de-Baathification in Iraq, leads to a complete collapse of state infrastructure.
- Protracted crises cause donor and media fatigue, limiting the available resources for relief and reconstruction.
- Because most rebel groups are locally based, highly fragmented and have little if any contact with the opposition in exile, the new government will likely face great challenges exerting control over local leaders. Rather than surrendering to the central authority, local leaders might prefer to forge alliances with other local leaders and/or external powers, as occurred during and after Lebanon's civil war.
- Large-scale looting, the destruction of military equipment and facilities, and the proliferation of weapons among the general population could increase challenges for a successor government to establish security
- A new Syrian Government may find it difficult to incorporate Kurdish-controlled regions. Boundary areas and demographically mixed portions of existing

autonomous Kurdish enclaves are likely to be violent flashpoints, as they have been in Iraq.

- If President al-Assad continues to govern the country, Syria will become increasingly isolated in the region, similar to Iraq under Saddam Hussein in the 1990s.

Methodology – For more information on scenario building, please refer to the ACAPS Technical Brief Scenario Development which can be found [here](#)

Disclaimer – Information provided is provisional as it has not been possible to independently verify field reports. As this report covers highly dynamic subject, utility of the information may decrease with time.

Sources – [Council on Foreign Relations 2013/02](#), [Time 2012/07](#), [Centre for a New American Security 2012/10](#), [Clingendael 2012/11](#), [Chatham House 2011/12](#), [DIIS 2012/08](#), [The Guardian 2011/09](#), [MERIP 2012/02](#), [UNHCR 2012/12](#), [Global Country Risk 2012/03](#)

ACAPS and MapAction would like to thank all organisations who have provided input to this report. The Syria Needs Analysis Project welcomes all information that could complement this report. For additional information, comments or questions, please email SNAP@ACAPS.org

