

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Preparing for the Approaching Syrian Endgame

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**B**ashar al-Assad's dictatorship has been rocked by a string of military defeats and by internal tensions within the minority Alawite-dominated regime that is battling for its life against a rising tide of predominantly Sunni rebel groups. Casualties, defections, and loss of territory have severely undermined the Syrian Army and Syria's security services, forcing the Assad regime to increase its dependence on Iran and its client Shiite militias.

The Obama Administration should use today's Camp David summit to increase cooperation with Arab allies to bolster the strength and unity of Syria's fractured rebel coalition against the Assad regime, Iran, and al-Qaeda groups inside Syria. Washington should also push for greater Arab support in defeating the Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS) inside Iraq and Syria and for greater security cooperation against Iran, including an integrated missile defense system to defend Arab allies against Iran's ballistic missiles.

### **Syria's Slow-Motion Implosion**

Rebel groups recently seized the city of Idlib and areas nearby, further loosening the Assad regime's already weakened grip on northwestern Syria. Although the regime maintains the upper hand in Damascus and predominantly Alawite

areas of western Syria, it has lost ground steadily in northern, eastern, and southern areas. The Syrian Army and security forces have been worn down and demoralized in a grinding war of attrition that has been waged since 2011. Recently, two top internal security officials were purged and another was killed under mysterious circumstances amid reports of internal dissension and rumors of an aborted coup attempt.

Meanwhile, opposition forces have increased their battlefield effectiveness with hard-earned experience, greater foreign assistance, and increased unity of operations as bigger factions have absorbed smaller factions. The improved battlefield cooperation of disparate rebel groups also reflects better coordination of aid from foreign backers. In particular, Saudi Arabia's new King Salman has elevated the priority of the struggle against Iran over the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, which has improved bilateral relations and strategic coordination with Turkey and Qatar, both of which support Syrian rebel groups linked to the Brotherhood.

The overstretched Syrian security services have gradually lost control of Sunni-populated areas and may soon be relegated to Damascus, major cities in central Syria, and the Alawite heartland along the Mediterranean coast. Although Assad continues to proclaim his authority over the entire country, he has become a failing sectarian bully, unpopular within his own Alawite sect and increasingly dependent on Iran, Hezbollah, and Shiite militia-men from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. As long as he remains in power, Syria will remain a chaotic, failed state in which al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists will flourish.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4407>

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## Time to Reset Syria Policy and Reassure Arab Allies

The Obama Administration's hesitant and vacillating Syria policy and its diplomatic courtship of Iran have left Arab allies alarmed and skeptical about the dependability of the United States as an ally. The Administration's initial neglect of the Syrian opposition and its decision to provide too few arms too late to moderate rebel factions helped enable Islamist extremist factions, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front), to dominate the rebel camp. The Administration's failed diplomatic efforts to promote a political solution through a transitional government led it to shortchange support for armed factions that could increase the pressure on Assad to agree to such a transition.

Today's Camp David conference provides the White House with an opportunity to reset its disastrous Syria policy and restore the trust of skeptical Arab allies. Unfortunately, only two of the six invited members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Kuwait and Qatar, are likely to send heads of state. King Salman of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's King Hamad have publicly snubbed the White House and are sending crown princes due to fundamental policy disagreements with the President over Iran and Syria. The rulers of Oman and the United Arab Emirates, both of whom are in poor health, also are sending subordinates.

At Camp David, President Obama should:

- **Stress the U.S. commitment to defeating potential Iranian threats.** Regardless of whether or not a nuclear deal with Iran is reached, the President should make clear that he is determined to pressure Iran to halt its support of terrorism, subversion, and revolutionary groups against U.S. allies. A primary goal should be gaining the commitment of GCC allies to build an integrated multilateral missile defense system to mitigate the growing threat of Iran's ballistic missiles.

The GCC states also seek to upgrade their securities to Washington and buy more sophisticated U.S. weapons systems. Washington should offer to designate them as "Major Non-NATO Allies," a status similar to Japan's that Kuwait and Bahrain already enjoy. That status also would increase their access to U.S. arms, although the Admin-

istration should make clear that it remains committed to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge against potential adversaries.

- **Emphasize that containing and defeating the threats posed by al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups is a top priority.** The Administration should work closely with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey to bolster moderate rebel groups associated with the Free Syrian Army and press them to halt support for Islamist extremist factions linked to al-Qaeda. Washington should also press all GCC states to crack down on the flow of funds and foreign fighters to extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.
- **Promote stability in Jordan.** Jordan is a key U.S. ally threatened by the destabilizing spillover effects of the civil wars in neighboring Syria and Iraq. Washington should work with GCC allies to provide economic aid to King Abdullah's government, humanitarian aid to over 600,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, and security cooperation against the Assad regime and Islamist extremist groups based in Syria and Iraq.
- **Investigate and punish Syrian chemical weapons violations.** The President should stop turning a blind eye to Syria's violations of its 2013 commitment to halt the use of illegal chemical weapons and announce that Washington will push for renewed action at the U.N. Security Council to investigate recent reports of the Assad regime's use of chlorine gas against its own people. The Saudis and other Arab allies are dismayed that President Obama has refused to enforce his own redline against Syria's use of chemical weapons and are understandably concerned that the Administration will also fail to enforce any agreement with Iran on restricting its nuclear program. Taking a harder line against Syrian chemical warfare violations would reassure nervous Arab allies and underscore to Iran that any violations of the pending nuclear deal will be vigorously investigated and penalized.

## Salvaging the Trust of Arab Allies

The six members of the GCC harbor strong doubts about the Obama Administration's credibility as an ally in view of its naïve and risky pursuit of

a nuclear deal with Iran and its disastrous Syria policy. Like Israel, they are concerned that Obama's rush to embrace Iran will undermine their own national security, but unlike Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, they prefer to demonstrate their unhappiness by sending subordinate leaders to Camp David rather than by publicly criticizing the Administration.

Although the Administration is unlikely to alter its strategy in the Iran nuclear negotiations, it could salvage the Camp David conference and partially restore the trust of GCC allies by taking a harder line against Iran on other issues, including working with GCC allies to bolster Syrian rebels against Iran's ally in Damascus and against Islamist extremists.

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