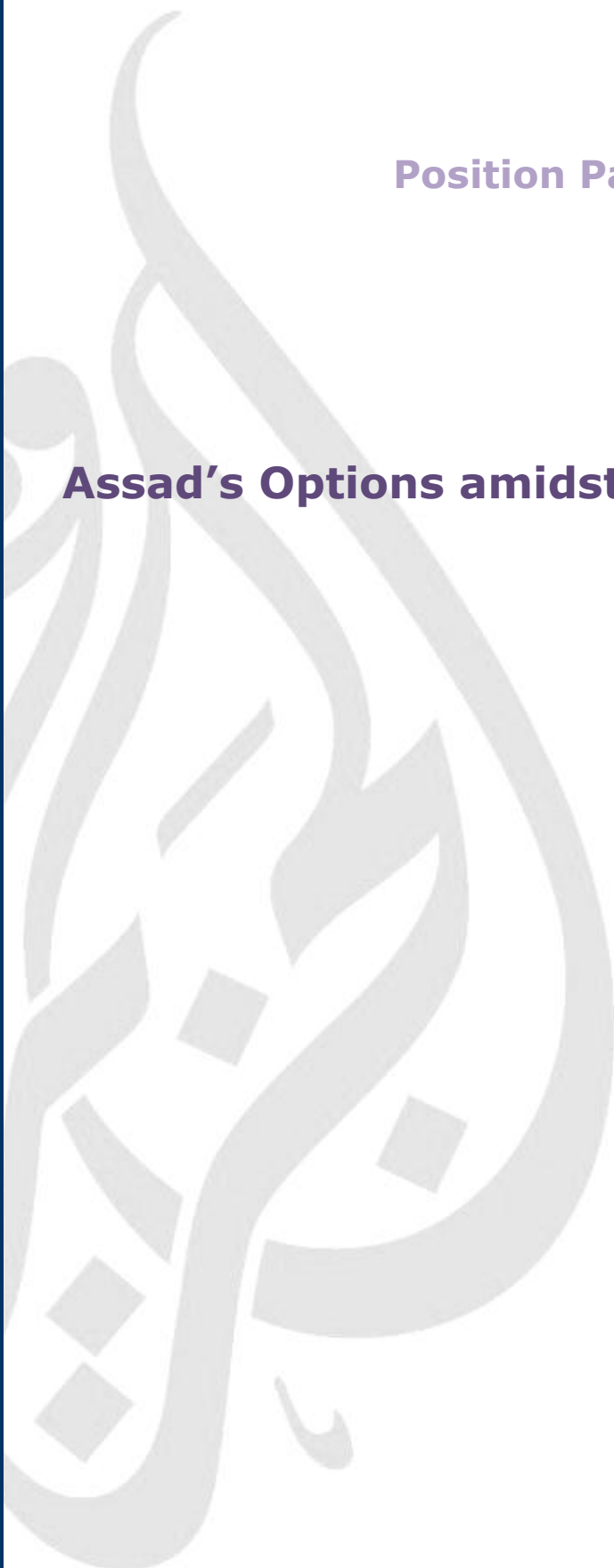




مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# Assad's Options amidst Regime Setbacks



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On 15 July 2012, several Damascus neighbourhoods saw continuous clashes between the armed opposition and the regime's military and security forces. Flashpoints included the neighbourhoods of Al Maidan, the main Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, and Yarmouk in addition to others south of the capital. Clashes in north of Damascus took place in neighbourhoods such as Barza, Mezzeh and Kafar Sousseh. On 18 July, a bomb explosion occurred at the headquarters of the National Security Council during a 'Crisis Cell' meeting. A number of senior military and security leaders were killed in the explosion, including Defence Minister Dawood Rajha; Deputy Chief of Staff and al-Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, the most hard-line Syrian official combatting the revolution and the popular movement. Clashes the following day intensified in various neighbourhoods and armed rebels declared the liberation of Al Maidan. Meanwhile, other groups of rebels and the Free Syrian Army began the process of liberating Aleppo, the second capital and the most populated city in the country, as well as certain international border posts with Turkey and Iraq.

Despite successive blows to its authority, the regime maintained its coherence, announcing the appointment of General Fahd Jassem al-Frej as defence minister and deputy commander of the armed forces. During the next few days, and while the military and security forces reshuffled to fill the vacuum left by the Crisis Cell blast, units of the fourth division led by the president's brother and shabbiha (allied militia) began a campaign to eliminate armed rebel groups in different neighbourhoods in the capital. By 24 July, the regime forces had already regained control of Al Maidan, Mezzeh, Barza, Kafar Sousseh and Qaboun in what appeared to be a quick end to the so-called battle of Damascus.

The regime's willingness to maximise its cruelty and scatter the corpses of its victims in Damascus streets should not overshadow its rapid decline in authority and the loosening grip of the military on the ground.

### **Significant Initial Setbacks**

The Crisis Cell blast was a costly blow to the Syrian regime not only because it claimed the lives of top officials but also because it revealed the fragility of and confusion within the regime's structures. There is no evidence of a conspiracy or internal assassinations and it would be foolish for the regime to eliminate so many high ranking officials during a conflict of this magnitude. This illustrates a serious threat. In fact, the tape distributed by the opposition, showing the National Intelligence building when the explosion occurred, confirms that the opposition was responsible. There is no reason for surprise. Defections in military and security ranks have reached the heart of those institutions, providing a vast gateway to opportunity for the opposition through which it could reach the pillars of government, its management and centres of authority.

Surely, It can be claimed that the Crisis Cell explosion is no more than a moral victory for the opposition and revolution forces. In a deeply-rooted and repressive state, the absence of a small number of leaders will not affect the regime much, but the explosion accompanied the progression of the revolution and its armed forces in all areas. Throughout that week, the had regime lost control over entire neighbourhoods; and its success in restoring military control over the capital was not possible without the summoning of new forces from outside Damascus. In addition, rebel groups in the suburbs were lacking supplies and support available to the rebels in the northern and eastern outskirts of the country.

The scarcity of supplies and human and logistical support is what allowed the Free Syrian Army and the other rebel groups to control most of the border posts with Turkey and Iraq. Such support also facilitated the battle to liberate Aleppo and eastern cities such as Al Bukamal and most of the predominantly Kurdish region northeast of the country. If the rebels manage to liberate Aleppo entirely after having controlled most of the province's countryside then the battle to liberate Syria will take a big step forward. Further exacerbating the crisis of the regime – whose policy from the start was based on defeating the revolution militarily, even when the popular uprising was still peaceful and defections in the ranks of the army were not yet significant – is the continuously

improving military performance of the Free Syrian Army and armed popular groups. Also, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar openly support armed revolutionary forces. However, the regime's problems extend beyond the issue of foreign aid to the revolution, which has been limited so far. In fact, one of its major problems is the accelerated disintegration of its military and the great increase of defections among officers and soldiers of various ranks and in different units.

There is no indication that the regime will fall soon. It has enough strength and capability for the time being, and will continue in the bloody battle against its own people. However, it appears to be more vulnerable now than they were at any other time since the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution eighteen months ago. The question remains: what options do the president and his inner circle still have?

### **Assad's Options**

At the ministerial meeting of the Arab League Council, held in Doha on Sunday, 22 July, the League (with the reservations of Iraq and Lebanon) gave al-Assad the option of stepping down with assurances that he would be provided with a secure exit and a safe haven for him and his family. Two days later, the US Secretary of State stated that "there is still time available to the Syrian president to step down and spare the country further bloodshed." The Syrian response was unsurprising: Damascus not only rejected the League's offer, but also considered it interference in Syria's internal affairs. The president's personality, his upbringing, sectarian interests associated with him, the support he still receives from Russia and Iran, and the military strength he maintains despite the increasing defections mean that it is still too early to expect him to step down or seek a negotiated solution.

Al-Assad's second option, in light of the current balance of power and following the Algerian military approach of the 1990s, is to continue to fight in hopes of eventually achieving military victory. In a recent speech in June 2012, he stated that Syria was at war. He meant exactly what he said –the regime was fighting a war in every sense and it would spare no effort to win it. Certainly, the Algerian scenario cannot be repeated not only because the regime faces a large-scale popular revolution, but also because western powers that supported or at least turned a blind eye to the Algerian coup leaders do not support the it and may even be planning to overthrow it by force. The regime must be aware of the complexity of the situation, but the continuing war may eventually provide them with a better negotiating position. The scale of destruction that will befall the country in the meanwhile does not seem to bother the leaders of the regime.

In the context of this war, rates of death and destruction will rise. The breadth of the defections will gradually turn the military and security machine into a sectarian or semi-sectarian institution led by a class of Alawite officers and a small number of other minorities and Sunnis implicated in the crimes of the regime. The regime will also try to create insurmountable problems for neighbouring states that support the opposition, for example, by facilitating the allies of Turkish and Kurdish groups to control territories in the north east or by spreading chaos in Lebanon.

The third option, which to a large extent is linked to the second and which would be dependent on a stalemate of sorts, is for the ruling Alawite groups and those allied to them to continue the war until it is clearly impossible for them to win and then to move to the Alawite majority areas in the coastal strip and the mountainous area bordering it in addition to the areas that can be easily secured in the fertile Syrian lowlands in the centre. The frequency of reports suggesting that the regime is reinforcing military capabilities in Alawite areas, and the extreme cruelty with which it deals with people's movement in this region imply that this might be the regime's strategy. This is in addition to the campaign of massacres, declared and undeclared, in the western villages of the provinces of Hama and Homs, which provide a strategic backyard for the Mountain Alawites. There is no doubt that these villages have been subjected to sectarian cleansing for months in an attempt to displace the largest number of Sunnis from their

villages and land while supporting the presence of the Alawite population that is spread out in significant numbers in the area.

Should the outcome of a sectarian divide be reached or should the regime continue to claim legitimate rule over the country after retreating to the Alawite region, the results will be disastrous for Syria as a whole but the Alawite sect in particular. Strategically, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the existence and stability of a mini sectarian state in a part of Syria, especially considering that the size of the Alawite sect is too small to be able to engage in prolonged confrontation with the Syrian majority. Moreover, a hostile environment will engulf the mini-state from almost all directions. It is also difficult to imagine the Alawite sect uniting behind the ruling elite after the fall of the regime.

### **In the Face of Risks**

Unless President al-Assad surprises the Syrian people, his regional opponents and the world by announcing an early abdication of power, any of the potential paths outlined would be a major threat to the future of Syria and its stability. The control of the main Kurdish cities by Kurdish nationalists (some of whom are gunmen trained in Iraqi Kurdistan) and the lack of a unified command for the armed forces of the revolution, are in themselves threats to Syria's future. If the ruling group opts to continue the war or attempts to entrench itself within a geographical and political Alawite entity or a geographical Alawite enclave with claims of national legitimacy, it will make the new Syria an indefinitely divided entity.

Saving Syria from such a fate requires two basic conditions: accelerating the collapse of the regime's military establishment, and a rapid strengthening of the capabilities of the armed revolution forces in terms of equipment, the quality of leadership and the unity of command. Even the external interference to protect the safe zone, as recently rumoured, will not be enough to spare Syria the risks of a long internal war and division.

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