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Syria: From Rebellion to All-Out War

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The situation in Syria at the beginning of 2013 could hardly be worse. Dead, wounded, refugees, a humanitarian disaster. President Assad is destroying his country and waging war against his own people. Russia and Iran back the regime. The West wants regime change without intervening militarily. The political opposition is now more united but overwhelmed with the situation at hand. The armed resistance, partially dominated by Jihadists, is difficult to size up.

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The rebels are backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. The killing continues. The population of Syria is being brutalized. It is becoming impoverished. It is falling apart. And it desperately needs help. A negotiated settlement does not seem to be in the cards; the opposition continues to insist on a political transition without Assad, and the latter is not prepared to relinquish power. This means that there is an urgent need for policy recommendations that can suggest a way of resolving this conflict, which has now acquired an international dimension.

Syria: the Country, its Regime, and its Society

“Suriyya al-Assad.” Assad’s Syria. This terse slogan was adopted by the Syrian regime and

leaves no one in doubt about who actually owns the country. It belongs to the Assad clan, and not to its 23 million inhabitants. The Assads have ruled Syria since a military coup in 1970, and their power has been based on three pillars: the armed forces, the intelligence services, and the Ba’ath party, which is based on Arab nationalism, and originally had a number of socialist elements. The regime makes adroit use of the fragile religious, denominational and ethnic composition of the population in order to retain its hold on power. In contrast to the fairly homogeneous societies in North Africa, in Syria there are 18 different religious and ethnic groups. 70% are Sunnites, 12% are Alawis, 12% are Christians, and 2% are Druse. In ethnic terms the Arabs are in the majority, followed by the second largest ethnic group, the Kurds. There are also Armenian, Circassian, Turkmen,

Aramaic, Assyrian and Palestinian minorities. Most of the Alawis settle on the coast, whereas the Druse are found in the south, and the Kurds in the north-east along the border with Turkey and Iraq. But in general, the ethnic and religious groups live in close proximity to each other. The fact that the Sunnites are the majority, whereas the people in key positions of power tend to be Alawis, is a sensitive matter. It means that conflicts can easily escalate in ethnic and sectarian terms. The Assads are in fact Alawis, and over the years the regime has robbed the latter of their denominational identity and turned them into accomplices of a dictatorship. The support of the Sunni business elite in Damascus and Aleppo was economically secured by means of corruption and clientelism. On the economic front the regime has secured the support of the Sunni business elite in Damascus and Aleppo by means of corruption and clientelism. The same is true of Christian entrepreneurs.

Top political positions are filled with representatives of all of Syria's sects. Thus none of the religious communities feels excluded, even though the country is actually being governed by a small group of powerful people close to the president. This hallowed circle is open above all to members of the Assad family and loyal supporters of long standing. Anyone who dares to voice public criticism is arrested, imprisoned and maltreated, no matter which ethnic or religious group the person comes from. Syria's dissidents include prominent Alawis, Christians, Druse, and Kurds. Thus it cannot be said that the Assad regime protects the minorities. In fact, it uses them for its own purposes. And it did this so adroitly that in the ongoing conflict the Alawis fear that the Sunnis will wreak revenge upon them; the Christians are terrified of the Islamists, whereas the Syrian Kurds, like their fellow countrymen in Iraq, have now set their sights on autonomy.

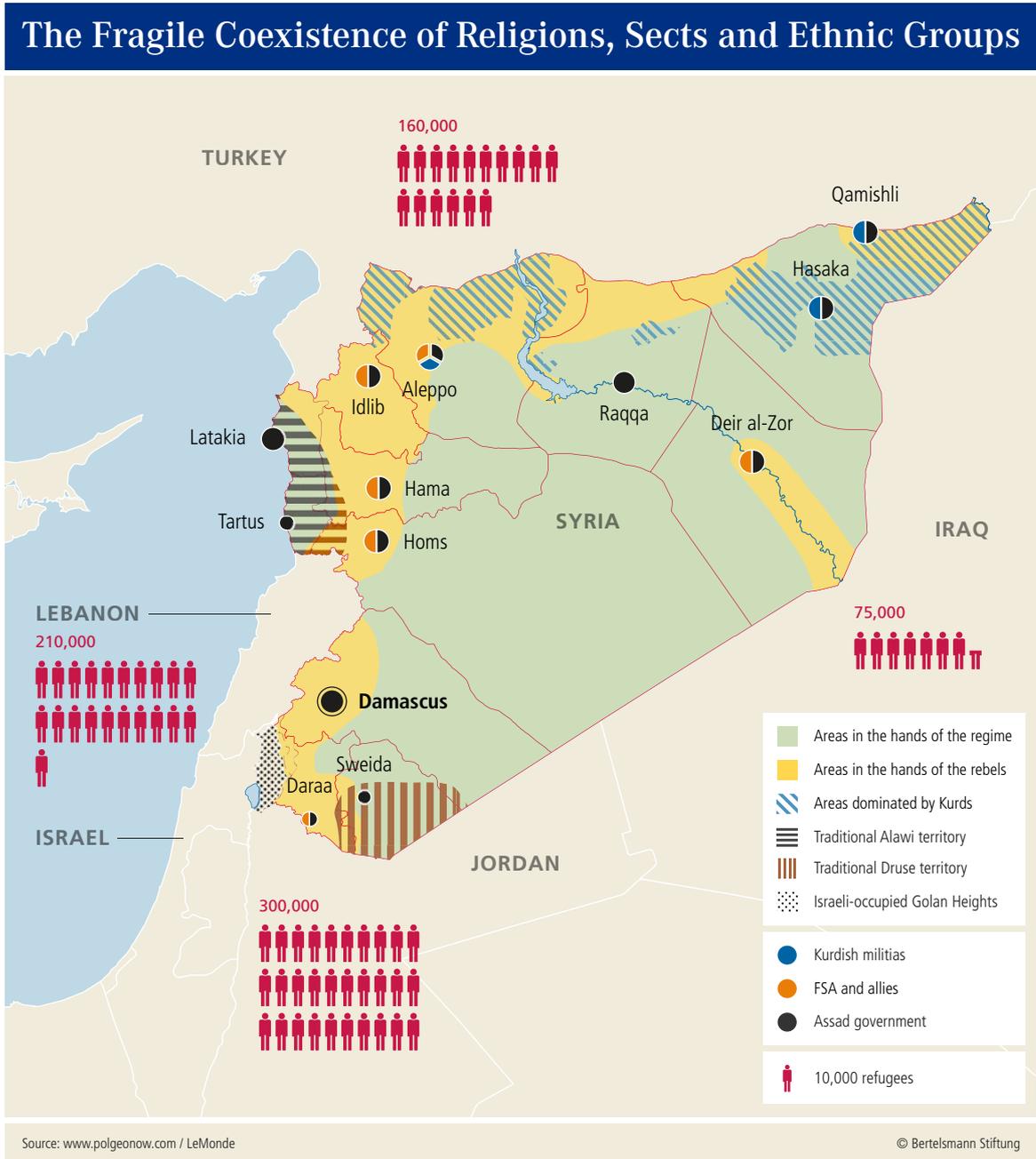
The Revolution: From Peaceful Uprising to Open War

In contrast to the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the Syrian revolution, which began in March 2011, first broke out in provincial areas.

The reason for this was the fact that the rural population had been neglected in the wake of an economic liberalization that worked in favour of Damascus and Aleppo, which were trade-based cities. In the countryside the memory of decades of oppression and the arbitrary activities of the intelligence services therefore mingled with a general feeling of hopelessness, a deeply felt sense of social injustice, and hatred of the corrupt elites. The demonstrators called on President Assad to introduce meaningful socio-economic reforms and a more open political system.

However, instead of spearheading this popular movement, Assad decided from the very beginning to crush the protests with the help of the armed forces. This prompted people throughout the country to express their solidarity with the victims, and it helped the revolution to spread. The strategy of fighting resistance wherever it reared its head and doing everything possible to prevent the protests from reaching the capital led to a situation in which activists started to form committees and took the work of local government into their own hands. In this way a grassroots movement emerged, and it turned Syria into a patchwork of protest hotspots. The regime was fighting back with heavy weapons and the shabiha (or "ghost") militias. These mostly Alawi mercenaries are extremely brutal, and they regularly persecute, maim, and kill civilians. There has been a growing need for protection, and this has made people willing to countenance armed resistance.

In June 2011 deserters from the regular armed forces who refused to shoot at their own people founded the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Ever more volunteers have joined them, and they include agricultural labourers, craftsmen, teachers, unemployed men, and students. However their requests for foreign assistance went virtually unheeded. The United Nations Security Council was in a state of paralysis. Meanwhile, Western states argued that the political opposition was far too fragmented and that armed resistance was far too confused to warrant their support. For this reason the FSA started to arm itself with the help of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Bombing runs on residential



areas, horrendous massacres among the civilian population, and the general atmosphere of distress and despair were the breeding ground for radical ideas. These acquired greater currency in Syria in the course of 2012. The unequal struggle increasingly attracted the attention of internationally active jihadists. These experienced, well-organized and well-networked extremists came to the assistance of the Syrians wherever they were fighting a losing battle for freedom, democracy, and the downfall of the regime. Some of them come from other countries, but they operate primar-

ily with the help of Syrian fighters. Although they are still not very numerous, they have notched up a number of impressive military victories over the regime forces. The most well-known groups are “al-Nusra Front”, which is said to have close links with al-Qaeda in Iraq (and has already been put on the US list of terrorists), and “Ahrar al-Sham”, which draws its inspiration from the salafists. The two groups are not integrated into FSA command structures, though they take part in joint military operations. The FSA is confronted with a dilemma. It badly needs the professionalism of

the jihadists in its struggle against the regime, though at the same time it cannot go so far as to adopt their ideology. This is a fine line to tread, for while radical Islamic views may seem repugnant to the majority of Syrians, they are quite useful when it comes to persuading men to fight against a powerful and daunting enemy.

The steady increase in the number of deserters and defectors – among them high-ranking members of the armed forces, diplomats and politicians – means that a dwindling group of people at the head of the regime are fighting for survival. They include President Bashar al-Assad, who bears political responsibility for what is happening; his younger brother Maher as the leading figure in the military command; his cousin Rami Makhlof, who wields considerable economic power; and the latter's brother Hafiz Makhlof, who orchestrates the intelligence services.

Even though a political solution to the conflict, an end to the violence, and a new beginning in political terms is certainly desirable, it seems unlikely to materialize in the immediate future.

All opposition groups – even moderate critics of the regime in Damascus – reject a future with Bashar al-Assad in power. They are willing though to negotiate with representatives of the regime on an orderly transition of power. Founded in November 2012, the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces urge direct talks with Syria's vice-president. Instead of making Assad's resignation a precondition for negotiations, this is now the aim of a political solution. However since Assad himself rules out a transfer of power there is almost no basis for talks. Both parties to the conflict – the regime and the rebels – are still confident that they can win the war and are therefore determined to fight to the end.

The National Coalition is trying to build alternative governance structures in order to be prepared for a change of government brought about by military action. Up to now it is the broadest opposition alliance; and because of its leadership it enjoys some credibility in the country. However, it lacks political experience and organizational skills.

Other Countries: Regional and International Interests

In strategic terms, virtually all of the lines of conflict in the Middle East intersect somewhere in Syria. As the map on p. 5 demonstrates, Damascus is at the centre of a complex regional line-up of power and interests. On the international level this has even led to what seems like a resumption of the Cold War. In the UN Security Council, Russia and China have consistently been on the side of the Assad regime, whereas Western members have supported the opposition.

Russia wants to prevent a repetition of what happened in Libya, where a UN Security Council resolution that was motivated by the internationally disputed legal principle of “responsibility to protect” led to a regime change brought about by foreign military intervention. It fears that Syria could become yet another example of this scenario.

On the other hand, the US and Europe believe that peace and democracy will come to Syria only if Assad is removed from power. Apart from this, a regime change in Damascus could force Iran to pull out of the Levant and weaken its resolve with regard to the nuclear conflict. However, the West is unwilling to take military action without a UN mandate. Many people believe, and so does Israel, that Islamist groups will be strengthened and, if worst came to worst, Syria will turn into a safe haven for international terrorists. In this connection, Assad's chemical weapons are also a cause for concern.

On a regional level Iran and Saudi Arabia (which has the backing of Qatar and Turkey) are competing for influence. Tehran continues to assist the Assad regime in military, logistic and financial terms, whereas Doha, Riyadh, and Ankara primarily support the various Sunni rebel groups. This stokes Shiite-Sunni tensions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain. Furthermore, the Kurdish question is once more in the regional limelight – something that is a source of anxiety in Ankara. On top of everything else, Syria's neighbours are having to cope with hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and are being destabilized in

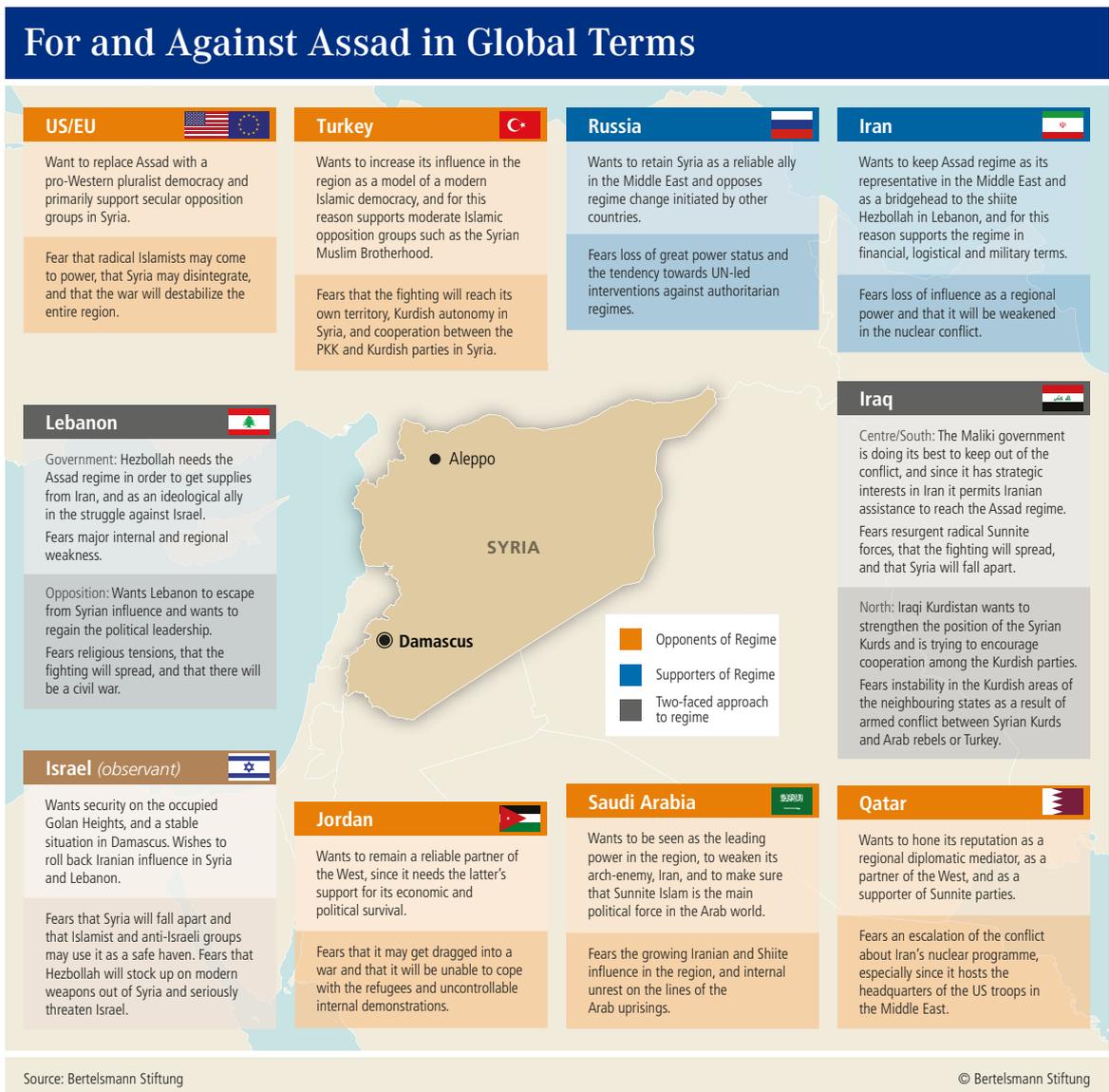
the process. This is especially true of Lebanon and Jordan. The regional initiative of Cairo's new president Mohammed Mursi, namely to negotiate a solution for Syria through talks between Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is on ice. The core problem in all political approaches is the controversial role of Assad in a transition. The meetings in early February 2013 in Munich between Russia, Iran, and the National Coalition brought some movement into the muddled situation and could give new life to the efforts of the Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League, Lakhdar Brahimi.

The reluctance of the West and the Arab League as well as the blockade of the UN let the Syrian regime so far free hand to suppress his

opponents. The brutal force used against the Syrian people by the Assad regime has made many Syrian's feel defenseless and caused them to lose confidence in the international community's ability to protect them.

Impending Threats and Policy Recommendations

Whether or not the current regime is removed from power, Syria is going to be faced with four significant threats: 1) A humanitarian catastrophe and the ongoing destruction of the country; 2) A society that has become brutal and militarized, which may lead to acts of revenge and



massacres; 3) A disunited or badly organized opposition, the weak leadership of which rules out an orderly political transition and makes it much easier for the state to disintegrate and collapse; 4) The growing influence of radical Islamic groups. The nature of these threats shows that the people of Syria need the support of other countries. Such assistance should be made available on a multilateral basis, coordinated by the National Coalition, and channelled as quickly as possible to where it is needed with the help of a legitimate body inside Syria.

1. Humanitarian assistance, Reconstruction, Prospects for the Future

There is clearly a need for far more practical assistance for the three million or so refugees (2.3 million displaced in Syria, and 700,000 in neighbouring countries). Creative and unbureaucratic procedures will have to be devised in order to reach the people inside Syria who are suffering and in need of help. Assistance should be sent primarily to the liberated parts of the country since many Syrians have fled to these areas; government services have ceased to function, and opposition groups find it difficult to provide the services that people need. Apart from this, these regions could demonstrate to the rest of the country that Assad will be followed by a stable and much better political system – and not by chaos.

The infrastructure that the regime has destroyed as part of its scorched-earth strategy, especially hospitals and schools, must be reconstructed as quickly as possible. A major challenge will be the provision of medical, social and welfare services for the war wounded, trauma patients, widows and orphans.

As long as there are no internationally recognized government structures in the areas controlled by the rebels that allow bilateral projects, donor countries should work together with NGOs that are already active in Syria and able to assess the situation on the ground (Doctors Without Borders, Grünhelme e.V., Syrian aid organizations in exile, etc.).

Furthermore, the new civilian self-rule structures should receive recognition and encouragement. Local councils have been set up in

many places; they enable activists, deserters, and volunteer combatants to cooperate. They are well aware of what the population needs, and in the course of the conflict they have developed a remarkable ability to cope with logistical problems. A functioning public sector, noticeably improved living conditions, and the prospect of employment opportunities in the postwar era will make life difficult for the proponents of radical Islamic ideas. And, they will make a decisive contribution to the pacification of the country.

The office of the working group on economic recovery and development in Berlin set up by the "Friends of Syria" with the support of Germany and the United Arab Emirates should pursue similar goals. This multilateral project ought to be upgraded in political terms and workforce.

2. An End to the Fighting, a Central Military Command, and No UN Troops

The FSA should set up central command structures as quickly as possible with the help of the National Coalition, so that when the regime is finally toppled they can form the nucleus of a new military leadership and a new defence ministry. The Higher Military Council, an alliance of various brigades that are prepared to work together with the National Coalition, will be able to assert its authority over the jihadist groups and attract the support of other rebel units only if it receives more money and better weapons. The ultimate goal must be to gradually establish political control over the armed resistance groups so that the end of the Assad regime will also signify the end of the fighting.

On the other hand, the deployment of an international security assistance force after the regime has been overthrown will be unpopular. The international community has watched the violence against civilians for two years and has left the Syrians to topple the dictatorship on their own. It is thus unacceptable, from a Syrian point of view, to then send UN Blue Helmets to help with “stabilization” and “the protection of minorities.” The right course of action would be to give Syria’s new military leadership the support it needs in order to

restore the state's monopoly on violence, to disarm society, to stabilize the country, and to provide security for all of its inhabitants. The EU could offer to help with the restructuring and realignment of the police force by providing appropriate training courses.

3. Transitional Justice, Reconciliation, and Messages to the Minorities

In order to pave the way for social reconciliation and the peaceful coexistence of all of Syria's religious groups, there is a need on the one hand for the speedy conviction and punishment of those primarily responsible for the violence perpetrated by the state, and on the other hand for an amnesty for the majority of Assad supporters. In the case of members of the security forces, it will be necessary to distinguish between the ringleaders and those who were merely fellow travellers. The earlier the opposition publicizes plans for a transitional judiciary, the better. A legal framework must reassure the minorities in general and the Alawis in particular that the purpose of the battle against the Assad regime is not to annihilate the Alawis or anyone else who happens to have different beliefs, and that they will have a place in the Syria of the future.

At this point in time such a plan could help to harmonize the judiciary in the liberated areas, convince the silent majority in Syria that the opposition is serious about setting up rule-of-law structures, and encourage members of the regime to defect.

4. Provisional Government, Retention of State Structures, and Reform of the Institutions

The National Coalition should begin with preparations for a provisional government. This is the only way in which it can gradually take over the administration in the liberated areas, establish confidence in the opposition's institutions, become a credible partner for donor countries, and thus provide an answer to the all-important question of what will come after Assad has been removed from power. Since a functioning bureaucracy is of crucial importance during the transitional phase, steps must be taken to

prevent state structures from disintegrating. Millions of Syrians are on government payrolls, and are dependent on public services. Only an opposition that has done its homework will be able to ensure that if and when there is a power vacuum the institutions will not dissolve into thin air, and that they will continue to operate and incorporate reforms that are socially acceptable. In this context, it is important to distinguish between the government and the ruling clique.

Such a provisional government could also serve as a stepping stone to a transitional government of national unity. This should consist of credible representatives of the revolution and of the opposition, individuals capable of promoting social integration, and leading representatives of the regime who were clearly not implicated in crimes or acts of violence. People should not be chosen because they are members of a certain religious group or sect, but on account of their personal integrity and their involvement in civil society. The establishment of a proportional system based on religion and denomination like the one existing in Lebanon should be avoided in Syria.

Time is of the essence. The recommendations described above should be implemented immediately and at the same time. As the conflict drags on, the likelihood of an orderly transition and a pacification of the country looks increasingly remote. And there is a growing risk that Syria will become mired in an ongoing war that will destabilize the entire region. The Israeli air force is already launching air strikes in order to prevent that Hezbollah is supplied with weapons out of Syrian arsenals.

In order to speed up the change in the political leadership, it will be necessary to put more military and diplomatic pressure on Assad's immediate entourage, to strengthen the National Coalition, and to make it clear to international supporters in general and to Russia in particular that a transitional solution without Assad, which is led by the Syrians without outside interference, is in everybody's interest. This basic agreement should be hammered out quickly in the course of face-to-face negotiations between Russia and the US. ■

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