



# SYRIA'S TURMOIL EXPLORED

A WIKISTRAT CROWD-SOURCED SIMULATION



September 2012

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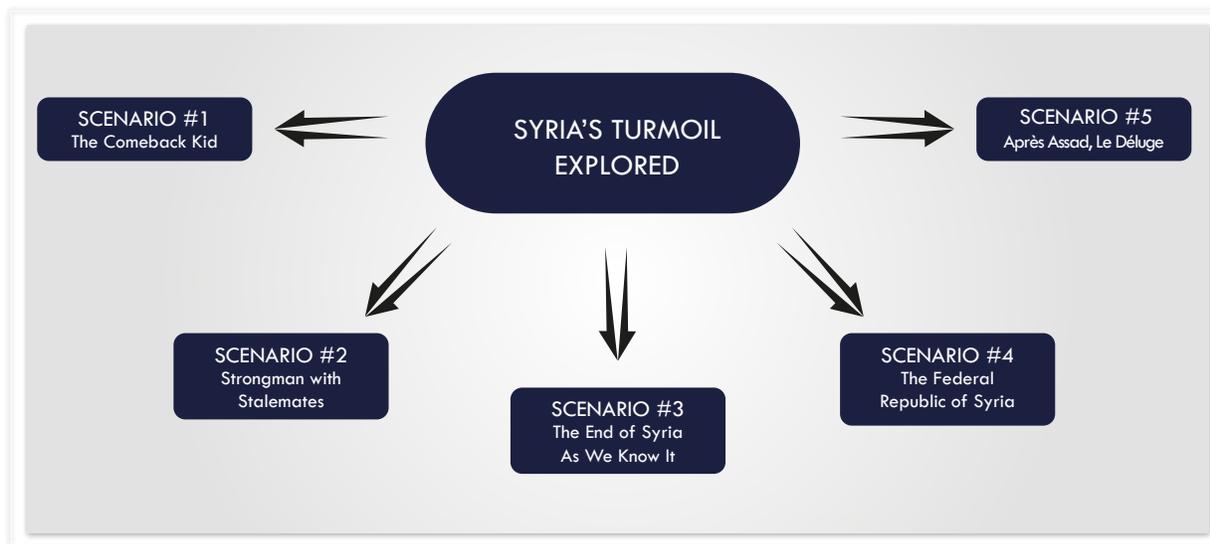
## Executive Summary

Wikistrat recently conducted a multi-week simulation evaluating the sustainability of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and forecasting possible consequences in the event of its collapse or survival. This executive summary presents that simulation's main findings.

Assad has little control over his own destiny. His survival to date has had less to do with his bloody suppression of insurgents than the absence of comprehensive foreign intervention, China's and Russia's diplomatic support (along with some material support from Moscow), and the opposition's enduring divisions. Brute force can put down any uprising, but it won't put the sectarian "genie" back in the "bottle". Those enduring tensions will do more to shape the future of Syria than anything Assad can now manage.

Absent assassination, military coup or outside intervention, the struggle will require significant time to reach resolution. Assad's forces keep the upper hand wherever they focus attention, but they cannot hold territory once they move on. Recent opposition successes notwithstanding, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) survives but does not flourish.

This Wikistrat simulation explored five scenario pathways. Overall, the analysts agreed that the rising sectarian violence, questionable army loyalty and ongoing defections dramatically reduce Assad's chances to restore stability. The most plausible scenarios thus portray a slow-but-continuous decline of the regime until Assad falls. At that point, the opposition's divisions and conflicting goals imply Libyan-style post-war difficulties.



### Scenario 1: The Comeback Kid

Assad reasserts his rule because he is willing to deploy ever more brutal force – including chemical weapons – while the opposition falters for lack of international support. The regime's survival revives the Iranian-Syrian axis at the expense of Saudi Arabia, which is ultimately forced to counter Iran's hegemonic aspirations by launching its own quest for a nuclear deterrent.

### Scenario 2: Strongman with Stalemates

Assad crushes the opposition but finds Syria's regional clout seriously diminished. Syria's multi-faith power structure, so carefully crafted by his father, has seriously fragmented. The all-important army, whose loyalty to Assad was certain only among Alawite elements, begins to suffer mass defections. The economy is likewise in shambles. Assad must form a new political contract – beyond the regime's Alawite core. But Syria's isolation, reflected in punishing economic sanctions, prevents him from bribing key power groups.

### Scenario 3: The End of Syria As We Know It

A "war of all against all" where, with or without Assad, Kurds and Sunnis achieve de facto autonomy while Alawites and Christians are persecuted outside of their coastal "safe zone" in which the regime or its remnants still rule. Syria, a truly artificial nation, effectively ceases to exist as a state, creating spillover effects in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq – all divided states themselves. Regional and great powers are sucked into the resulting conflagrations.

### Scenario 4: The Federal Republic of Syria

The best case posits a transitional military rule, during which the central state is weakened in favor of a federal model that prevents further sectarian conflict between Syria's numerous faith communities. As a result, Tehran is further isolated in the region, while the collapse of the Shi'a Crescent lessens the near-term likelihood of Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. Turkey emerges as the region's shining beacon and Syria falls under its influence.

### Scenario 5: Après Assad, Le Déluge

The longer the uprising takes, the more radicalized the opposition becomes, resulting in religious extremists taking control of Syria following Assad's fall. The upside? Sunni fundamentalists break the supply line between Iran and Hezbollah and, once the Syrian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood reasserts itself, align the regime with benefactors Turkey and Egypt.

Wikistrat deems direct Western intervention unlikely in all paths. The combination of intervention fatigue and a desire to avoid further antagonizing China and Russia stays the West's hand, especially as air strikes are unlikely to prove decisive. Frozen by the uncertainty of who will prevail post-Assad, the West's waiting game risks letting the opposition eventually succumb to the Sunni jihadist rebels who have declared Syria the new battleground in their effort to establish an Islamic caliphate.

Being a proxy battle between the region's pro-Western Sunni regimes and the Russian-backed Shi'a Crescent, Syria's civil war tips the balance of power in one side's favor:

- No matter how it concludes, the Syrian struggle increases Israeli and Saudi apprehension about Iran's march toward nuclear weaponization: An Assad victory only emboldens Tehran and his demise only accelerates Tehran's campaign.
- If Assad falls, Russia's regional influence is greatly diminished unless it boldly decides to stick with Iran and – by extension – Hezbollah, resulting in a Cold War-like proxy struggle with the U.S. that exacerbates Sunni-Shi'a conflicts on the ground.
- The longer the uprising lasts, the more likely it is that Hezbollah hedges its bet by reaching out to the FSA to protect its supply line with Iran. There are huge risks

for the organization: the FSA may not welcome its support and shortsighted policy makers in Tehran could decide to stick with Assad at all costs.

- No matter who or what succeeds Assad, the Kurds and Turks will be winners. The former can achieve independence, possibly with Iran's backing since Tehran will be in need of new allies. Successful autonomy in northern Iraq provides a model for the Kurds in Syria, just as the successful blend of secularism and Islamism in Turkey provides a model for young "Arab Spring" democracies throughout the Islamic world. However, the two are unlikely to peacefully coexist in the short term, given Turkey's own Kurdish secession movement. The best outcome, from Ankara's point of view, would be mass Kurdish migration out of Turkey into the newly autonomous Kurdish territories. Such a non-Arab state in the middle of the Arab world would need allies and likely prefer alignment with Turkey, Israel and the United States.

As longtime regional Leviathan, the United States possesses few good diplomatic options. If Washington reaches out to the Syrian military or, together with Moscow, negotiates Assad's resignation, it risks finding itself on the "wrong" side of history. In the end, it may be better for Washington to continue procrastinating. A prolonged conflict disadvantages America's prime regional enemies, Iran and Hezbollah, while leaving Turkey a chance to assert itself as the champion of the Sunni revolutionary cause.



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The report is based on the collaborative effort of over  
120 Wikistrat analysts.



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