The three most salient U.S. preference structures regarding the conflict in Syria prioritize limiting regional instability, containing Iran, and safeguarding chemical and biological weapons. As a result, we view the best outcome in the Syrian conflict as a rebel victory that would result in part from indirect and clandestine U.S. support. This approach is not likely to prevent a protracted conflict in Syria, though that is unlikely to be avoided in any scenario. Regardless of U.S. policy, the situation in Syria is expected to be extremely violent and unstable for the foreseeable future.

Executive Summary¹

This paper concludes that the most likely medium-run end state to the conflict in Syria is de facto partition of the country into a region controlled by the current regime and another region divided among various rebel factions. Of the potential end states analyzed here, de facto partition is not only the most likely, it is also the worst for U.S. interests. The analysis is based on a series of decision matrices that are standard in the Multi-Attribute Decision Making approach, a method of systematically comparing objectives across a range of national interests. Those interests are then weighted to reflect varying policymaker preference structures.

The paper also finds that the United States has no attractive policy options in Syria. The best of a bad set of options is to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime while indirectly providing limited support to rebel groups.

The decision matrices applied in this paper are structured to force policymakers and analysts to confront the contradictions and tensions inherent in American interests in Syria and the potential outcome of the conflict there. Too often policymakers, analysts, and pundits prescribe policy without expressly confronting the risks and costs associated with that course of action. Such thinking is common, feckless, and unacceptable when civilians are being killed and violence is a potential course of action.

The outcomes considered here are (1) the rebel coalition defeats the Assad regime while receiving indirect and covert support from the United States and its allies; (2) de facto partition of Syria into a region governed by Assad and a region governed by various rebel factions; (3) transitional government built from Assad supporters and rebel leaders produced essentially through negotiation; (4) a United Nations-led international peacekeeping effort to enforce a

¹ The views expressed here are the authors’ own and do not represent the views of the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. government.
power-sharing agreement among the Syrian combatants; (5) rebel victory facilitated by substantial American support, including major weapons transfers and/or overt military intervention; (6) an Assad victory.

The U.S. interests used to assess the desirability of those end-states are (1) limiting civilian casualties; (2) preventing the development of terrorist safe havens on Syrian territory; (3) limiting Iranian influence; (4) minimizing the risk that chemical or biological weapons will be used; (5) minimizing the risk that chemical or biological weapons will proliferate; and (6) limiting the spread of instability in the region.

Based on the comparison of each end state across these strategic interests, we find that:

- The best outcome across all policymaker preference systems is a negotiated transition to a power-sharing government. However, given the failure of the United Nations negotiations process to date we assess this is not a likely policy outcome and therefore the United States should focus on more feasible alternatives.

- The most consistently negative outcome across all policymaker preference systems is a de facto partition of Syria. We assess this to be the most likely outcome given the limited capacity of the opposition groups and the current capabilities of the Assad regime.

- Given that the best option is so unlikely, it is necessary to determine the best feasible sub-optimal end state. In assessing the sub-optimal outcomes, this analysis suggests that no single end state is second best under all policymaker preference systems.

- For policymakers who do not prioritize any specific U.S. interest or that prioritize regional containment or humanitarian concerns, an international peacekeeping mission to enforce a ceasefire agreement is second best. Unfortunately, we assess that this option is also quite unlikely considering Russian and Chinese opposition to a United Nations mission.

- For policymakers who prioritize Iranian containment, on the other hand, the second best outcome is a rebel victory over Assad without overt international intervention.

- For those who prioritize preventing al-Qaeda or its allies from establishing safe havens in Syria, the second best outcome is a United Nations mission or an Assad victory.

- Not surprisingly, considering the variance in second-best end states at fulfilling various policy preferences, there is a range of reasonable disagreement over what U.S. policy should intend to achieve in Syria.

Our view is that the three most salient preference structures prioritize limiting regional instability, containing Iran, and safeguarding chemical and biological weapons. As a result, we view the best outcome in Syria as a rebel victory that would only result in part from indirect and clandestine U.S. support. The United States should therefore provide training and assistance to rebel factions, but mitigate the possibility of blowback from jihadist-affiliated rebels by avoiding the temptation to supply poorly vetted rebel groups with a large amount of weapons. This approach and goal is not likely to prevent a protracted conflict in Syria, though that is unlikely to be avoided in any scenario. Regardless of U.S. policy, the situation in Syria is likely to be extremely violent and unstable for the foreseeable future.

These findings leave United States’ policymakers with a range of difficult end states to choose from, each with relative strengths and weaknesses. NATO intervention would offer utility for direct-action counterterrorism
missions, but it would be deeply destabilizing regionally. A rebel victory would help limit Iranian influence, but it is likely to worsen the humanitarian crisis and would offer jihadist groups a foothold in Syria.

American interests in Syria are in conflict with one another, which means that policymakers must prioritize interests in order to choose a desired policy outcome. The failure to prioritize U.S. interests in Syria has led to a policy of ad hoc tactical choices rather than a unified strategy with a clear objective. At the same time, a range of policy recommendations fails to adequately confront risks associated with the pursuit of specific end states. Syria demands forceful United States policy, but ending the Assad regime is not an end state; it is an aspiration.

This analysis would not be complete without considering what for many are unthinkable, and unlikely, scenarios: that the Assad regime will survive the current upheaval and reassert control over some or all of Syrian territory.

In practice, scenarios in which Assad survives would be extremely violent and undermine international and United States’ credibility in the Middle East. They would also reopen the door to expansive Iranian influence. Nonetheless, a return to the status quo ante would bring a modicum of predictability to regional dynamics, though increasingly acute Arab and Turkish opposition to Assad would create new and critical tensions. A reassertion of Assad control, however, would likely be quite bad for jihadist groups in Syria. Despite tolerating such groups in the past, Assad—under attack by jihadists sponsored by al-Qaeda in Iraq—is unlikely to do so in the future.
1. Introduction

The series of Middle Eastern revolutions known as the Arab Uprisings have overturned decades-long dictatorships, and with them the United States’ traditional foreign policy approach to the Middle East. Nowhere has this upheaval been more disruptive to the United States foreign policy consensus than Syria, where peaceful political protest has escalated into civil conflict between a fractious rebel coalition and the weakened, but still formidable, regime of President Bashar Assad. Assad has responded to the rebellion with massive and often indiscriminate violence, but has been unable to quell the growing resistance, which is now capable of striking even senior regime targets in Damascus. The rebel movement, which is receiving military and financial support from backers in the Middle East, has established control over small areas in the north and east of Syria but is unable to consolidate their territorial holdings, let alone forcibly remove the Assad regime conventionally. In short, neither the government nor rebel groups appear capable of a decisive victory, despite ongoing violence that has been producing over 1,000 Syrian deaths each month for more than 15 months.

The operational stalemate and severely complex political elements at play in Syria revealed deep divisions in American foreign policy visions under the Obama administration in light of the Arab Spring. The Syrian conflict is deeply connected to broader regional dynamics with key players driven by internal rivalries and a range of ethnic, religious, and nationalist agendas. Both allies and enemies of the United States stand on all sides of the Syrian conflict. Whereas foreign policy debates in Washington are often about how to achieve a particular, generally agreed-upon outcome, the debate over Syria is more fundamental: it is about what end state would best serve United States’ interests. The uncertainty over what end state is best limits the usefulness of the current debate, which is focused on the extent to which military action is a useful tool for deposing Assad. Providing a methodology which defines and evaluates these end states is the purpose of this paper. This is intended to structure the scope of policy debates to enable policy makers to clearly assess the risk and benefits of various options. This methodology invites disagreement over the costs and consequences of different end states, but lays out a framework by which they can be fruitfully debated.

The failure to prioritize U.S. interests in Syria has led to a policy of ad hoc tactical choices rather than a unified strategy with a clear objective.

We assess six “end states” in Syria and the impact each would have on American interests. The six end states are:

- The rebel coalition defeats the Assad regime with only limited and covert international support
- De facto partition of Syria into a region governed by Assad and a region governed by various rebel factions
- Transitional government built from Assad supporters and rebel leaders produced essentially through negotiation
- A ceasefire agreement enforced by a United Nations-led international peacekeeping mission
- Rebel victory backed by U.S. and allied military force
- And, an Assad victory.

Of course it is true that none of these “end states” will end history in Syria or resolve all of the underlying political grievances among combatants, but they represent reasonable culminating points for the current stage of civil conflict.

In order to judge the impact of these end states on US strategic interests, we use a simple ordinal ranking system (from 1 being the “best” and 6 the “worst”) along six key dimensions: limiting civilian casualties; preventing the
Development of terrorist safe havens on Syrian territory; limiting Iranian influence; minimizing the risk of use of chemical and biological weapons; limiting the risk of proliferation of chemical and biological weapons; and limiting the spread of instability in the region. We then weight those interests differently in various scenarios to reflect policymaker priorities, such as counterterrorism or countering Iranian influence.

We therefore compare end states under various preference structures to determine the relative desirability of different end states.

This analysis leads to several key conclusions:

- **Holding all else equal the worst outcome is a de facto partition of Syria.** We also believe this to be the most likely outcome given the limited capacity of the opposition groups and the current capabilities of the Assad regime.

- **There is a range of reasonable disagreement over what U.S. policy should intend to achieve in Syria.** Different end states best serve U.S. interests depending on the relative value placed on various U.S. interests. None of these end states serves all U.S. interests best.

- **Judged across the preference systems modeled here, a negotiated transition to a power-sharing government is the most consistently good outcome.** It is also the least likely, and almost certainly not a reasonable policy option as a result.

- **All reasonable U.S. policy options are deeply sub-optimal.** For example, the scenarios that will best limit al-Qaeda’s ability to use Syrian territory as a safe haven are the most likely to enable Iranian influence. At the same time, supporting the decisive victory of rebel combatants in Syria is likely to have serious humanitarian repercussions and contribute substantially to increased regional instability.

## 2. United States Interests in the Syrian Crisis

Although the US and the world have a range of interests and reasons for concern about the on-going conflict in Syria, based on existing information, we assess that six key issues are driving U.S. policy debates:

**Limiting civilian casualties**

The moral and strategic imperative of mitigating the humanitarian disaster created by civil war in Syria is difficult to overstate. The world has unprecedented video evidence of atrocities, which have been committed by both rebel and regime forces, though the Assad government has been particularly brutal in its indiscriminate use of heavy weaponry and organized torture.

**Preventing jihadists linked to al-Qaeda from establishing safe-havens in Syria**

The rebellion in Syria is highly localized and while most rebels are motivated by a sincere desire for better governance, the fighting has also empowered both latent Syrian jihadist elements and foreign jihadists, including some linked to al-Qaeda. Prior to the rebellion, jihadist groups, sometimes with tacit acceptance by the Assad regime, used Syrian territory for transit in and out of Iraq. But the environment has grown more permissive for al-Qaeda as governance has decreased.

**Countering and constraining Iranian influence**

Iran has played a disruptive role in Middle Eastern politics for decades, sponsoring Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas, and backing a range of Iraqi Shia militant networks responsible for hundreds of American deaths. Iran’s most important Arab ally is Syrian President Assad, and Damascus remains a critical lifeline for Iranian assistance to Lebanese Hezbollah. The unrest in Syria offers an opportunity to undermine an Iranian ally and disrupt its support for one of the world’s preeminent terrorist organizations.
Preventing the use of Syria's chemical and biological weapons

The Assad regime controls one of the Middle East’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons—a resource that it has threatened to use against foreign invaders, while promising not to use against rebel forces. The Syrian regime has reportedly moved weapons precursors into close proximity such that they could be combined to create a weapon with little notice. The Obama Administration has clearly stated that it considers the use of chemical or biological weapons by the Assad regime as a “Red Line” that would fundamentally alter U.S. calculations on the conflict.

Preventing the proliferation of Syria’s chemical and biological weapons

This could happen in two ways: transfer to friendly terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah; or the capture of chemical weapons and distribution by rebel factions. In either scenario, the transfer of such weapons would be extremely destabilizing considering Hezbollah’s rancorous relationship with Israel and the infiltration of jihadist elements among rebel groups. Existing evidence suggests that chemical and biological weapons stockpiles are being moved around the country.

Limiting regional instability

The conflict inside Syria is deeply connected to wider regional dynamics, including simmering sectarian rivalry between Sunni and Shia political and social factions, competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a Turkish bid for influence in the Arab world, Arab politics toward Israel, Russia’s concerns about setting a precedent for regime change on humanitarian grounds, and the moral and political leadership of the United States in the region. The threat of instability from Syria spilling into conflict in Iraq and Lebanon is quite real and would be deeply antithetical to United States interests. Already the conflict in Syria has elements of a proxy fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Russia’s unwillingness to collaborate with the international community on Syria has become a key sticking point in its broader relationship with the United States, which is critical for maintaining sanctions pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. Limiting regional political instability as a result of the Syrian crisis is a key American interest.

3. Regional Actors and the Likelihood of End States

Predicting how a conflict as complex as Syria’s will evolve is extremely difficult, but one critical step is to define the key domestic and international players in the conflict. The conflict in Syria will be the result of a multifaceted interaction among a wide range of actors, each connected to the others in innumerable ways. Indeed, Syria’s social, economic, and physical geography ensures that Iranian, Lebanese, Arab (represented most importantly by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar), Russian, Turkish, Israeli and European interests are all deeply at play in the civil war there, not to mention the United States.

Domestic Syrian Contingents

The Assad Regime and Loyalists:

Assad and much of the Syrian elite, especially the military, belong to the Alawite sect, which constitutes about 12 percent of the 23 million Syrians. The Assad regime has ruled in Syria for 40 years. Ongoing Iranian and, to a more limited extent, Russian support ensure the Assad regime has both the financial and military resources to continue military action in Syria. In addition, many claim that the Assad regime has also provided aid and resources to extremist terrorist groups like Hizballah and Hamas, and has at times aided al-Qa’ida terrorists and former regime elements in Iraq.

The Opposition and Anti-government Elements:

Despite growing coherence among Syrian opposition groups, most notably in a network called the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the Syrian anti-regime elements remain a fractious
collection of political groups with long-running and deeply held divides along ideological, ethnic or sectarian lines, and loose coalitions of anti-government fighters.\textsuperscript{15} Currently, the opposition is supported by a flow of weapons, medical supplies and money across the Turkish border, using a range of refugee camps as the source and base of operations.\textsuperscript{16} This has raised tensions with the Turkish government as well as increasing concerns about Kurdish regions in the northern parts of Iraq and Syria, which contain separate extremist elements who stand to gain from increasing flows of illicit goods across their borders.\textsuperscript{17} Jihadi organizations, most notably Jabhat al-Nusrah, have established themselves not only as a powerful military contingent among the Syrian rebels but also a staunch provider of food aid to Syrians in Aleppo and other cities.\textsuperscript{18}

**The Syrian Population:**

According to estimates from the United Nations, the conflict has left more than 60,000 people dead.\textsuperscript{19} Tens of thousands more are displaced. Reports from human rights and aid organizations suggest that the regime’s arrests have focused on secular activists, those involved in organizing and providing humanitarian aid, and men and boys from the towns that the loyalist Syrian Army has cleared and held. A recent Human Rights Watch report details information on nearly 30 separate torture and interrogation centers across Syria.

**International Contingents**

**Iran:**

Iran has three distinct strategic reasons for financially and diplomatically supporting the Assad regime. First and foremost, Iran views Syria as a bulwark against the United States and Israel. According to U.S. estimates, Hezbollah receives $100 million in supplies and weaponry per year from Tehran, much of which is transported through Syria.\textsuperscript{20} Iran has also historically funded HAMAS. The cost to operate for both groups would increase should the Syrian opposition restrict the movement of these groups as it has promised. Second, the Iranian regime opposes setting a precedent for the Right to Protect, which argues that international parties should intervene when a government deliberately attacks its own population. Finally, sympathetic Alawite control over a majority Sunni population constrains the influence of rival Saudi Arabia and broader Sunni-Arab parties in the Middle East. Thus, Iran has a clear strategic interest, both for domestic stability and regional influence, to maintain the Alawite leadership in Syria.

**Russia:**

Russian-Syrian ties are longstanding and span a range of military, economic, and cultural issues, but Russia’s primary interest in maintaining the Assad regime is strategic. The Right to Protect is seen by the Putin government as potentially limiting their own freedom of action regarding the Chechens. The Russians even use similar rhetoric to the Assad regime to frame the Chechen opposition as jihadists. In both Chechnya and Syria, some of the opposition are jihadists, but many are not. Moreover, neither the U.S.-led conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan nor the Arab Spring have weakened Russian-Syrian ties, and Syria remains a key sphere of influence. This is highlighted by the Russian naval station at Tartus, in northern Syria, Russia’s only military installation outside of former Soviet territories. Economically, a large number of Russian companies have invested in and are currently working on oil and natural gas exploitation in Syria. However, Russia has also placed limits on its support for the Assad regime. On July 9, 2012, Russia publicly stated it would halt new weapons sales to Syria until the conflict subsided, providing a blow to the Assad regime’s source of revenues and arms.\textsuperscript{21} In late 2012, Russia’s diplomatic support for Syria wavered further, but it is unlikely to support international intervention in to Syria. Russia has maintained its position to veto any effort to pass a resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN council, which would allow military force to end the conflict, it has issued support for the UN mission and proposed peace plan (brokered by Kofi Annan).\textsuperscript{22}
Turkey:
Despite a complex history of sectarian and imperial rivalry, in the last decade Syria has been largely seen by Ankara as a key element in Turkish engagement and influence in the Middle East. The importance of Syria in Turkish foreign affairs can be seen in the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, free trade zone, visa-free travel between the two countries. The turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations began after reforms negotiated between Erdogan and Assad representatives were broken in Fall of 2011. By November of 2011, Erdogan was calling for Assad’s removal and imposing a set of unilateral sanctions far more harsh than any other country in the world. Since then Turkey has hosted Syrian opposition groups and been a key protector for Syrian refugees. Nonetheless, Turkey’s approach is somewhat ambiguous; it has demanded that Assad step down, but appears divided about the wisdom of military action, with concern that a “limited” military intervention might serve as pretense for a full-scale operations that would increase instability on their border. Increased instability because of the large number of refugees flowing into Turkey (up to 80,000 in June and July 2012) and straining resources. Additionally, Turkey is concerned about increased Syrian Kurdish control over Northeastern Syria and links between Syrian Kurds and the Kongra-Gel (KGK) militant group. KGK is mostly composed of Turkish Kurds and is dedicated to establishing a Kurdish homeland in territory that is now Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

In December 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department officially designated Jabhat al-Nusrah, a Syrian militant group, as an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Arab States:
Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, and backed in particular by Qatar and Jordan, have numerous interests in Syria. The first and most active is maneuvering to limit Iranian influence in the Arab world. This perspective is motivated by the geopolitical imperative to limit the reach of a regional power and broader distrust of Iran’s ideological outlook, especially its efforts to support Shia movements in the predominately Sunni Arab world. Importantly, Arab states will also seek to limit Turkish influence in the Arab world, though that interest is secondary to the anti-Iranian perspective. The Arab states will not behave as a bloc. Jordan in particular is highly susceptible to refugee flows and is likely to be more risk averse than some of its Gulf state allies as a result.

Al-Qaeda:
Al-Qaeda’s core interest in Syria is to establish another safe-haven and overturn what it considers an apostate government, but the group also sees Syria as a key way to make inroads into the Arab Spring movement writ large and to attract a new generation of recruits. There are likely differences in perspective between regional al-Qaeda organizations: whereas al-Qaeda’s senior leadership is more likely to be focused on Syria as a mechanism for asserting jihadist influence in the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda in Iraq sees Syria as part of its operating environment and aims to use the popularity of the anti-Assad jihad to reestablish the flow of jihadist foreign fighters, which has slowed considerably since the Anbar Awakening in 2007 and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. In December 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department officially designated Jabhat al-Nusrah, a Syrian militant group, as an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

4. Potential End States in the Syrian Conflict

Systematically defining and analyzing potential end states in an environment as complex as Syria is profoundly difficult and virtually guarantees errors; nonetheless, it is a necessary exercise for analysis and thinking about United States strategy. This paper identifies six basic end states and some of the circumstances likely necessary to give rise to them. It then ranks the efficacy of a particular end state
against the others, according to its likely utility for protecting the six United States’ interests described above, with one being the best and six the worst. In order to rank the end states, it is important to consider both the circumstances of the end states themselves and the most likely pathways by which that end state would be achieved.

These rankings undoubtedly reflect difficult judgment calls rather than incontrovertible truths. Such is the nature of analysis intended to inform policymaking. Data is always incomplete and outcomes opaque. The authors invite and encourage other analysts to utilize the analytical framework introduced here to come to their own conclusions about preferred end states using alternative judgments about the utility and likelihood of those outcomes. So long as all schemas acknowledge the tradeoffs to American interests in various end states to the conflict in Syria, such disagreement is at the heart of productive policy disagreement.

The judgment calls that inform this analysis are somewhat easier to define because the end states envisioned here are relatively self-contained and short-term. This conceptualization of course does not consider long-run outcomes and wider geopolitical circumstances. These are undoubtedly critical issues and should be addressed in future studies.

The structured analytical approach utilized here derives from the social science literature on optimal decision making in the presence of multiple, usually conflicting criteria, especially a model known as multiple attribute decision making (MADM). MADM requires a number of pre-specified alternatives in which the decision making is forced to make intra and/or inter-attribute comparisons to determine the range of tradeoffs between different potential outcomes. Critically, these rankings evaluate only the relative benefits of each attribute (in this case, US strategic interests) along each end state without judgment about the likelihood of these end-states coming to be or the severity of the different benefits between those attributes.

### Scenario 1: Rebels depose Assad or he otherwise cedes power to a coalition of rebel leaders in Syria

In this scenario, Bashar Assad would likely flee the country or be killed in a coup. In the wake of Assad’s elimination, rebel factions would compete for influence and control while foreign factions, including Turkey, Iran, and various Arab states, would continue to back their favored partners in Syria. This scenario assumes substantial high-level defections within the Syrian armed forces and significant, but covert, international support for rebel organizations. This scenario presumes the practical defeat of not only Bashar Assad but his immediate and most fervent supporters as well.

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**Limiting Civilian Casualties**

This scenario is the second worst for protecting civilians because a rebel offensive against Assad strongholds would be extremely violent and creates a strong likelihood of reprisals against regime supporters. Moreover, it is most likely to be part of a long drawn-out process. Only an Assad victory would be worse for civilian casualties.

**Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens**

A rebel victory would create more opportunities for terrorist safe havens than the status quo ante or a NATO peacekeeping force, but fewer than a partition scenario. Divisions between rebel groups would almost certainly weaken a rebel governing coalition and thus governance would be deeply inconsistent across Syria. This is especially true because existing state institutions, many of which are
dominated by Alawites, are unlikely to operate effectively in the immediate post-Assad period. Considering that jihadist factions are actively working with some elements in the rebel coalition now, this suggests that jihadist groups would be able to find governance gaps in a rebel-dominated Syria to plan and train. Although a NATO intervention in Syria would significantly energize al-Qaeda-linked jihadist elements as well, we deem an independent rebel victory scenario even worse in this regard for two reasons: first, this scenario presumes a relative lack of international assistance for rebel groups which may push some rebels to seek assistance and guidance from jihadist elements and, second, the lack of a NATO force likely precludes a dedicated international mission to target jihadist cells operating Syria. Lastly, not all jihadist groups are equal. Whereas an independent rebel victory might empower some jihadist groups, international intervention is more likely to encourage jihadists in Syria to consider attacks on Western targets outside of Syria.

**Countering Iranian Influence**

This is the best scenario for limiting Iranian influence. The largely Sunni rebels are generally hostile to Iran, particularly because of Iran’s strong support for Assad after the revolution began. Although Iran would likely continue to funnel support to Alawite resistance groups in a Sunni-dominated Syria, they would find using Syria to funnel weapons and money to Lebanese Hezbollah much more difficult. This scenario presumes that rebels would gain substantial control even over Alawite-dominated areas in northwest Syria, a condition that distinguishes this scenario from the de facto partition end state discussed elsewhere.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons**

**Proliferation**

A rebel victory also leaves a high likelihood that chemical and biological weapons will proliferate. In the waning days of Alawite control, elements might transfer some to Hezbollah—or sub-groups thereof—despite the risks of provoking a response from the international community. Moreover, chaotic rebel takeovers of chemical weapons stockpiles would create a major danger that some will fall into jihadist hands—either directly or as a result of criminal factions selling them off.

**Limiting Regional Instability**

A rebel victory in Syria would be more destabilizing than a UN peacekeeping mission or a transitional government, but less so than an Assad victory, partition, or NATO intervention. A rebel victory would likely embolden Sunni factions in western Iraq and pull Iran into supporting Shia militant networks in Syria more strongly; it would also frighten Israel and anger Russia, which despite anger over the Assad regime’s dalliance with chemical weapons, nonetheless fears that western support for Syria’s rebels sets a precedent regarding international support for rebel groups in the Caucasus.

crisis. Moreover, the presence of jihadi elements among the rebels is likely to heighten desperation by regime and Alawite elements frightened of sectarian reprisals.
Scenario 2: De facto partition of Syria into a region governed by the Assad regime and another governed by rebel factions

In this scenario, regime loyalists, with or without Assad himself, would govern relatively securely in an arc along the Lebanese border, including Damascus and the Russian naval facility at Tartus. Rebel factions would govern with various degrees of control elsewhere. The de facto partition of the country would likely lead to substantial internal refugee flows as Assad and rebel factions consolidate populations by sect: with Shia and potentially Christian populations entrenching in Assad-controlled territory and the majority Sunni population elsewhere. Another likely characteristic of this scenario is intense division within the rebel-held territories as local factions assert local control. The central town of Homs would be a key strategic point, as it is a central transportation hub for main roads running both north-south and east-west.

Limiting Civilian Casualties

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**Limiting Civilian Casualties**

Partition offers a better chance for limiting civilian casualties than NATO intervention, rebel victory or an Assad victory, but is likely to be less effective than a transitional government or UN peacekeeping mission. This scenario would likely lead to population movements of Alawite and Sunni communities into relatively socially homogenous regions, a process that is likely to be quite violent. Other minority groups, such as Christians, may be targeted by jihadist elements and many with the appropriate means are likely to leave the country. But partition may mean that there will be less indiscriminate violence as one side or the other forces its way into enemy held territory.

**Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens**

Partition is likely to create circumstances highly amenable to al-Qaeda safe havens. Partition is likely to be unstable, creating violence that jihadists will continue to exploit. Moreover, rebel held territory is unlikely to be unified. The rebellion is built on innumerable local resistance groups, some of which are working closely with jihadists. In a partition scenario, rebel groups will have little incentive to suppress these groups because of the latent threat from the remaining Alawite regime.

**Countering Iranian Influence**

This scenario is also quite poor at limiting Iranian influence, only better than an Assad victory. The reason is that Assad loyalists are likely to continue to welcome Iranian military support in the areas they control and those regions will almost certainly border Lebanon such that Iran will be able to continue funneling weapons through Assad-controlled territory to Lebanese Hezbollah.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Use**

Partition carries a relatively high risk that chemical or biological weapons will be used. Most chemical weapons facilities in Syria are located in a western arc near the Lebanese border—territory that Assad loyalists will likely control, and the establishment of consolidated rebel areas might provoke the remaining Assad regime elements to use chemical weapons in order to break the stalemate.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Proliferation**

Similar to a rebel victory, a stalemate in Syria might provoke Assad supporters to transfer some weapons to external allies such as Hezbollah. At the same time, there is a risk that some chemical weapons will come under rebel control in a period of active hostilities, which is deeply
worrisome because of the diversity in the rebel coalition and the limited capacity to secure these weapons.

**Limiting Regional Instability**

Partition is also the least effective scenario at limiting regional instability. This scenario suggests a prolonged period of hostilities and essentially offers Arab actors, Turkey, and Iran both the incentive and capability for pumping resources into the conflict. The relatively high risk of jihadists and proliferation will be dangerous for Israel and the United States—and partition will be deeply concerning to Russia, which fears a precedent in its own rebellious regions.

**Scenario 3: Assad regime elements share power with rebel factions in a transitional government as a result of international mediation**

This scenario, which roughly reflects the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, is both the most desirable and the least likely. It would likely require Assad’s exile, though it would also mean that some senior elements of his regime would remain in Syria to participate in the transitional governing process. This scenario assumes that although there remains some influence by existing Assad regime members, the power dynamics in the new government would more closely reflect the sectarian composition of the Syrian population. This scenario is most likely if Assad regime elements calculate that they are able to cut a better deal for themselves without Assad being present in Syria. The presence of jihadist elements within the rebellion substantially reduces the likelihood of this scenario because it undermines the ability of the rebel coalition to reliably guarantee the security of Assad regime elements that wish to stop fighting and cut a deal. In turn, that reduces the likelihood that they will make such a deal.³

**Limiting Civilian Casualties**

This scenario is the best for preventing civilian casualties because it would essentially produce a diplomatic agreement to stop the fighting.

**Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens**

A transitional government would offer terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda a relatively good opportunity to establish safe havens, but the other scenarios—with the exception of an Assad victory, which would be terrible on other metrics—are likely to be worse. Rebel groups that have tolerated jihadist groups are unlikely to renounce them in the short-run, fearful of the chaos they could continue to produce. Moreover, some political factions would likely tolerate jihadists as a means of bolstering their negotiating position within the political process. Jihadists themselves would be extremely hostile to this end state, not simply because it would rely to an extent on international support, but also because it would tolerate some continued Alawite influence in Syria’s political life. There is likely to be a significant minority among Syria’s rebels that would oppose an end state such as this one under all circumstances.

**Countering Iranian Influence**

A transitional government would be relatively useful for limiting Iranian influence in Syria, third to a complete rebel victory and a NATO intervention in the country. A transitional government would inevitably advantage Syria’s majority Sunni population. But by allowing former regime elements in government it would likely offer Iranian agents a way to directly influence the political process without preventing them from still supporting latent Alawite militant groups.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Use**

A transitional government carries a relatively low risk of chemical and biological weapons use. Because this scenario is the product of a negotiation process, there is likely little incentive or scope for the Assad regime or rebel elements
successful in capturing weapons to use these weapons.  

Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons

Proliferation

A transitional power-sharing agreement would presumably allow for bureaucratic elements that control weapons facilities to maintain authority and it would allow for a governing transition with protections for regime supporters, limiting the risk they would distribute these weapons or be overrun by extremist elements of the rebel coalition. Risk would come primarily from criminal and small networks attempting to acquire and sell the weapons.

Limiting Regional Instability

A transitional government is the best outcome in terms of limiting regional instability. Although regional players would attempt to influence the transitional government, that process would have certain international legitimacy and, if it included some protections for regime supporters, likely be compatible with Russian interests.

Scenario 4: A UN peacekeeping mission and no-fly zone to establish semi-permanent buffer zones for rebel groups on Syrian territory

This scenario assumes Arab League support and, necessarily, agreement from Russia and China to the UN mission. It is therefore quite unlikely. A version of this concept implemented without UN authorization is also possible, especially under a NATO rubric. That scenario is more likely, but would essentially make all of the outcomes discussed here worse, with the potential exception of countering Iranian influence. In general, this scenario would reduce direct conflict between regime loyalists and rebel forces, but would likely not eliminate sectarian attacks or prevent terrorist strikes. This scenario presumes that a large international presence could limit civil violence reducing humanitarian concerns but would be less successful than a negotiated transitional government at fundamentally resolving Syria’s political challenges. This scenario could result in a semi-permanent UN mission, similar to the international presence in Kosovo or Lebanon. A critical limitation of such a force would be its inadequate ability to address or contain terrorist (either jihadist or Shia) elements in Syria, similar to UN missions in Lebanon.

Limiting Civilian Casualties

A UN peacekeeping force would be second only to a negotiated transitional government at preventing civilian casualties as it would endeavor to freeze the conflict and would pressure combatants to limit efforts to make political or territorial gains.

Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens

The failure of UN missions in Lebanon to prevent terrorist safe havens suggests that a similar mission in Syria would be far from successful at eliminating such governance gaps, though the presence of U.S. ground and air capabilities would offer the ability to conduct counterterrorism operations and gather intelligence. Jihadists however, are likely to view the UN presence as a hostile force despite their opposition to the Assad regime. The presence of Western intervention in the Muslim world has been al-Qaeda’s most important recruiting point since 1998, despite U.S. and NATO support for Muslim-dominated factions in Bosnia just prior to that period. While international intervention in Syria might limit some of the local jihadist groups in Syria, such intervention will be exploited for recruitment by globally-focused jihadist groups.

Countering Iranian Influence

Iranian influence is likely to remain reasonably high in Syria in the case of a United Nations enforced ceasefire. Although such a force would certainly limit some Iranian military provisions to Assad loyalists, Iran has decades of
experience moving materiel into Syria and extensive contacts and networks. Moreover, this scenario presumes that Assad regime elements would retain control of part of the country. Although this scenario is certainly better than Assad remaining in power or partition at minimizing Iranian influence, it is likely worse than either a rebel victory, transitional government, or a NATO intervention. A United Nations force in Syria is likely to suffer some of the same weaknesses as those in Lebanon, including an unwillingness to challenge powerful actors and limitations on the type of force it can use. Like previous UN missions in the region, Iranian-backed militant groups would likely target a UN mission in Syria.

Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Use
This scenario offers a superior chance of limiting use of chemical weapons than partition, a rebel victory, or a NATO mission, but it is likely worse than an Assad victory or a transitional government. After all, Assad has threatened to use chemical weapons against foreign troops entering Syria. Nonetheless, a peacekeeping force would endeavor to control chemical and biological weapons stockpiles and would be operating with at least the tacit approval of Russia, a key Assad ally.

Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Proliferation
A UN mission in Syria would likely be quite effective at preventing chemical and biological weapons proliferation. Assad regime elements are likely to transfer weapons only under dire circumstances, not an enforced ceasefire and the presence of UN troops limits the possibility that elements of the rebel coalition will capture and sell chemical weapons.

Limiting Regional Instability
A United Nations peacekeeping force would be relatively effective at limiting regional instability, but the risk of regional conflagration would remain high. Iran will almost certainly react to a peacekeeping force by supporting troublemakers in Syria, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia has shown every indication of opposing such a force, and would likely only approve such an operation grudgingly. Nonetheless, a UN force would have more international legitimacy than a NATO mission.

Scenario 5: Regime change enforced by a NATO mission in Syria that would include direct confrontation between international forces and Assad loyalists.
The transitional government that would result from this sort of intervention would likely include less Alawite regime influence than a negotiated transition government. A NATO force, likely including Turkish conventional forces backed by United States and European aircraft and Special Operators, could minimize direct conflict between Assad and rebel forces, suppress the Syrian Air Force and deeply damage Syria’s fixed anti-air defenses, but would likely not eliminate sectarian attacks completely. This reasonably large international force would ultimately assert operational control over Syrian territory and enable the deposition of Assad, but the development of a transitional government would almost certainly be clumsy, at best. The presence of NATO troops would facilitate significant efforts to root out jihadist elements in Syria, though such efforts are also likely to destabilize the relationship between NATO forces and elements of the rebel coalition. Moreover, diehard jihadist elements are likely to target NATO troops directly and encourage attacks abroad. A political accommodation that results from a NATO intervention is likely to be highly unstable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
<th>Chem/Bio Weapons Use</th>
<th>Chem/Bio Weapons Proliferation</th>
<th>Regional Instability</th>
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</table>
**Limiting Civilian Casualties**

This scenario would likely produce a large number of civilian casualties because it would require a western bombing campaign against Syrian air defense installations, which would produce significant collateral damage. NATO forces could limit attacks on civilian areas by Assad but confrontation between international forces and Assad troops is likely to be centered in urban areas. Moreover, elements of the rebel coalition are likely to commit serious reprisal attacks against Assad loyalists and in Alawite communities.

**Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens**

International intervention would certainly inflame jihadists, but many rebel commanders would likely tolerate or encourage a crackdown on jihadist groups in exchange for international help. Moreover, NATO forces could put pressure on the jihadist groups directly, including through the use of Special Operations and drone strikes. Nonetheless, this scenario is worse than an Assad victory, negotiated power transition, or UN peacekeeping effort for limiting al-Qaeda safe havens.

**Countering Iranian Influence**

Iranian influence is likely to be limited in the event of a NATO invasion, but will remain reasonably high. The presence of NATO troops will ultimately result in the Assad regime’s downfall and make Iranian efforts to fund allied militias more difficult, but Iran has operated successfully in similar circumstances in the past, most notably recently in Iraq and previously in Lebanon. A further consideration is that a large deployment of western troops within range of Iranian conventional and unconventional forces offers the regime an increased deterrent capability in the showdown over Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Use**

This scenario offers the highest chance that chemical or biological weapons would be used in Syria, a judgment largely dependent on Syrian government statements that they would only use such weapons in the case of a foreign invasion.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Proliferation**

Though the risk of chemical or biological weapons use is high in this scenario, it would be relatively useful for limiting the risk of proliferation because NATO forces would be present to secure stockpiles. There is a serious danger that Assad would transfer some weapons to allies such as Hezbollah.

**Limiting Regional Instability**

A NATO force in Syria would destabilize the region significantly, second worst only to partition. A NATO force would almost certainly involve basing in countries neighboring Syria, probably Turkey. Arab countries prioritize confronting Iranian influence in Syria, but they are likely to resist what they deem excess Turkish influence as well. Iran will strongly oppose any intervention in Syria, but its preferences will vary. For Iran, an independent Turkish intervention would be least noxious, but one backed by a strong Western presence would be deemed deeply threatening, worse than a relatively benign UN peacekeeping force. A NATO force also carries the significant risk of angering Russia, which is likely to treat the situation as an effort by European and American forces to constrain the key Russian base at Tartus and as a dangerous precedent for international intervention in what it deems a country’s domestic affairs.

**Scenario 6: A full Assad victory, which is considered unlikely by many and is anathema to most, is nonetheless a potential outcome of the civil war in Syria**

An Assad victory shocks the conscience and would threaten the credibility of both international institutions and the United States in the Middle East, but it cannot be completely discounted. Assad’s military is still more sophisticated than the rebels’ and continues to receive both monetary and military support from Iran. Moreover,
Despite manifest evidence of regime brutality, it likely has tools at its disposal yet to be deployed on the battlefield. There is precedent for leaders to remain in power despite international disapproval of their vicious repression of political opposition. For example, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurds (1988), suppressed Shia uprisings (early 1990s), and ruled for a decade even while the United States enforced no-fly zones under operations Provide Comfort, Northern Watch, and Southern Watch (1991-2003).

Besides the moral costs, Assad remaining in power directly threatens the credibility of international institutions and the United States in particular, just as Saddam Hussein’s survival did during the 1990s. Assad’s survival would deeply damage the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P), which argues that the international community must intervene when state actions massively violate basic tenets of human rights. The R2P doctrine is particularly relevant to American credibility in the Middle East today, as the Obama Administration is attempting to reframe western interaction with the region away from primarily oil politics. In the context of Assad remaining in power, these issues of credibility must be considered alongside the six interests that are the primary analytical framework for this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens</th>
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<th>Chem/Bio Weapons Use</th>
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</table>

**Limiting Civilian Casualties**

This is the worst outcome from a humanitarian perspective. An Assad victory in Syria would likely be the result of a sustained, brutal, attack to retake urban rebel-held areas. To say nothing of the likely retribution against rebel-held areas after retaking control, these assaults would almost certainly rely on indiscriminate indirect fire with terrible consequences for the civilian population.

**Preventing al-Qaeda Safe Havens**

This is the best outcome in terms of preventing al-Qaeda and its allies from finding a safe haven in Syria. Although al-Qaeda affiliates traversed Syria with regime acceptance during the Iraq war, Assad is no strategic ally of al-Qaeda and likely now recognizes the danger of such groups even more. Moreover, an Assad victory is the most reliable pathway to coherent governance across all of Syrian territory, and is therefore most likely to prevent relatively ungoverned space.

**Countering Iranian Influence**

Iran’s most important Arab ally remaining in place is the worst outcome in terms of limiting Iran’s regional reach. It will also enhance the influence and role of Lebanese Hizballah, which has stood by the Assad regime even as other erstwhile terrorist allies, such as HAMAS, have abandoned it.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Use**

This is the second best outcome in terms of limiting the likelihood that chemical and biological weapons would be used. The Syrian regime has maintained a chemical weapons capability for decades without using them or transferring them to terrorist groups and would be unlikely to do so unless the regime was directly threatened. The regime is unlikely to use such weapons to retake rebel-held areas because of the risk that would inspire the international community to intervene. A regime offensive to retake rebel areas would be horrific, but Assad would do his killing conventionally.

**Preventing Chemical and Biological Weapons Proliferation**

This scenario is the fourth best for limiting chemical weapons proliferation, behind a UN mission, negotiated
power-sharing, and NATO-backed regime change. Assad would be unlikely to transfer weapons unless directly threatened and rebel groups would be unlikely seize control of stockpiles in this scenario. Nonetheless, the international community would have very little opportunity to stabilize stockpiles and prevent their distribution.

Limiting Regional Instability
Considering the chaos in Syria today, none of these end states will contribute productively to regional stability in the short-run, but a return to the status quo ante is likely reasonably useful for producing regional stability. Still, the simmering conflict has already pulled in regional players and they are unlikely to cede that ground in the case of an Assad victory. Regional proxy fighting would be likely to continue indefinitely.

Likelihood of Different End-states
Absent the significant use of military force by western forces or a substantial, and unexpected, success by international negotiators trying to facilitate a transitional government, we consider the most likely scenario to be the de facto partition of Syria. This is driven by the inability of either the regime or rebel groups to deliver a decisive blow, the unwillingness of both Russia and China to support a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing force, and Turkey’s troop movements along its southern borders, which effectively creates “safe zones” that allow opposition groups to recover, train, and organize. The Syrian Army has attacked rebel strongholds in the north (particularly Idlib), but remains wary of approaching the border and potentially inciting direct conflict with Turkey and, potentially, NATO as a whole, a scenario codified by the deployment of Patriot missiles to southern Turkey. However, the limited supply and corresponding high prices of weapons for the opposition make territorial gains relatively unlikely.

The most likely outcome of a fracturing Syria is sustained internecine conflict in a Syria roughly divided into three major chunks: with the Alawites (perhaps still headed by Assad) controlling the west, Sunni opposition groups controlling the north and center and Kurdish Syrians controlling the north-east. This last area is particularly interesting, as the Kurdish National Council (the loose federation of major Kurdish party inside Syria) and the Democratic Union Party (the Syrian offshoot of the PKK) have established a power-sharing agreement that will keep Syrian Kurdistan fortified against both Assad and Sunni Arab forces.

5. Comparing End States Across Different Strategic Priorities
Any United States policy decision about the end state to seek in Syria should take into account all six key interests described above. But policymakers are likely to weigh the importance of those interests quite differently depending on their point of view. Those differences structure much of the disagreement about how the United States should proceed in the Syrian crisis. In MADM analyses, attributes can be weighted to determine the optimal decision under a range of policy preferences. While the functional structure in which weights are included can vary, simulation studies suggest that results are likely to be the same regardless of the method employed. As such, we use a simple set of multiplicative weights to compare the robustness of the rankings when the various U.S. interests are weighted differently.

While the proposed mechanism for weighting policy priorities is crude, it provides a critical thought experiment regarding the tradeoffs that must be made in practice. It is not credible for policymakers to argue that they care about all of these interests in a maximal way; nor even for serious policymakers to suggest that they care about a single variable completely at the expense of all others. Prioritizing everything means prioritizing nothing, a position represented by the “Balanced” view, and each of these preference structures maintains some emphasis on every variable.
The six preference structures analyzed here are:

- Balanced Approach
- Limit Regional Instability
- Humanitarian Approach
- Iranian Containment
- Counter al-Qaeda
- Chemical/Biological Weapons Safeguarding

The Balanced Approach weighs all interests equally, the Chemical/Biological Weapons Safeguarding approach, which roughly approximates the current stated views of the Obama Administration, weighs Chemical/Biological Weapons Use at 40 percent Chemical/Biological Weapons Proliferation at 20 percent and all others at 10 percent. The remaining preference structures weigh a primary interest at 50 percent and the rest at 10 percent.

There are limitations, of course, to using these weighting systems for estimating the utility of different policy end states. The first is that this coding system is structured around the relative utility of various end states, but it does not account for variation in the degree to which a particular end state is better than others at securing a particular interest, i.e.: a transitional government may be the best course of action for limiting civilian casualties, but its superiority may still only be only marginal; whereas it may be far worse than an Assad victory at limiting terrorist safe havens. The second problem is that this system does not account for the likelihood of each end state coming to be, which may make the expected costs of affecting the end-state substantially different. Third, it does not measure the expected cost to the United States of achieving each end state.

Here we compare six different preference structures that reflect divergent mechanisms for weighing the six interests.
The Balanced Approach evenly weights the six interests and offers a baseline judgment by weighting each interest at 16.67 percent of the overall assessment.

Table 1. Balanced Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEIGHTED OVERALL UTILITY RANKING (1 is best)</th>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>AQ Adherents and Affiliates</th>
<th>Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons—Use</th>
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Notes: Ranking system is ordinal and based on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst. Weights for each category are reported in parentheses under attribute label. Aggregate ranking based on weighted outcomes is reported under “weighted overall ranking”. Ranks are reported in each cell with weighted outcome reported in parentheses.
The Limit Regional Instability Approach emphasizes limiting regional political problems by overweighting the regional instability interest (50%) and reducing the weighting of all other interests (10%).

**Table 2. Limiting Regional Instability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEIGHTED OVERALL UTILITY RANKING (1 is best)</th>
<th>Rebal Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>AQ Adherents and Affiliates Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
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The Humanitarian Approach emphasizes limiting civilian casualties (50%) and reduces the weighting on all other interests (10%).

Table 3. Humanitarian Approach

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The Iranian Containment view puts a premium on weakening Iran (50%), while reducing the value placed on all other interests (10%).

Table 4. Iranian Containment

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>AQ Adherents and Affiliates Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons—Use</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons—Proliferation</th>
<th>Limiting Regional Instability</th>
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<td>4</td>
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</table>

Notes: Ranking system is ordinal and based on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst. Weights for each category are reported in parentheses under attribute label. Aggregate ranking based on weighted outcomes is reported under “weighted overall ranking”. Ranks are reported in each cell with weighted outcome reported in parentheses.
The Counter al-Qaeda Approach prioritizes limiting al-Qaeda safe havens linked to al-Qaeda (50%), while reducing the emphasis on all other interests (10%).

### Table 5. Al Qaeda Counterterrorism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEIGHTED OVERALL UTILITY RANKING (1 is best)</th>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>AQ Adherents and Affiliates Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons—Use</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons—Proliferation</th>
<th>Limiting Regional Instability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebels Win</td>
<td>WEIGHT 0.10</td>
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<td>0.60</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Assad Victory</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Ranking system is ordinal and based on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst. Weights for each category are reported in parentheses under attribute label. Aggregate ranking based on weighted outcomes is reported under “weighted overall ranking”. Ranks are reported in each cell with weighted outcome reported in parentheses.
The Chemical/Biological Weapons Containment Approach prioritizes the two chemical/biological weapons interests, offering more weight to preventing the use of such weapons (40%) and preventing proliferation (20%). The other interests remain static (10%).

**Table 6. Chemical/Biological Weapons Containment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WEIGHTED OVERALL UTILITY RANKING (1 is best)</th>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>AQ Adherents and Affiliates Safe Havens</th>
<th>Countering Iranian Influence</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons--Use</th>
<th>Chemical/Biological Weapons--Proliferation</th>
<th>Limiting Regional Instability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebels Win</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.10</td>
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<td>0.20</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Enforced Ceasefire</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Ranking system is ordinal and based on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the best and 6 being the worst. Weights for each category are reported in parentheses under attribute label. Aggregate ranking based on weighted outcomes is reported under “weighted overall ranking”. Ranks are reported in each cell with weighted outcome reported in parentheses.
6. Conclusion

The primary results from the analysis of end-states according to the various preference structures are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Balanced Approach</th>
<th>Limit Regional Instability</th>
<th>Limiting Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>Iranian Containment</th>
<th>Counter al-Qaeda</th>
<th>Counter-Proliferation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebels Win</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.70</td>
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</table>

It is clear that de facto partition is the worst outcome and given the above analyses of the current international climate it is also highly plausible. A negotiated power-sharing agreement offers the best outcome across every preference structure, but it is extremely unlikely to the point where we believe the United States should not consider it a viable policy option. The possibility of a UN peacekeeping mission to enforce a ceasefire requires a similar calculation because such a mission would require a dramatic change in policy by both Russia and China. The relative ranking of the other alternatives—an outright rebel victory, regime change, and an Assad victory—vary based on policy maker priorities. This variance illustrates the important tradeoffs that policymakers must weigh while developing sub-optimal policy responses to the Syrian conflict. Importantly, however, the tradeoffs are not simply between humanitarian and more traditional national security goals. For example, successfully countering al-Qaeda in Syria and limiting Iranian influence in Syria are contradictory.

This matrix offers a mechanism for thinking through the relative utility of various policy end states, but those end states are not the only elements that must be considered by policymakers weighing the United States’ approach to Syria. They must also consider the degree to which different objectives should be prioritized, the relative likelihood of an end-state being achieved, and the relative costs associated with attempting to bring it about. It must also be emphasized here that just because a particular end state is likely to produce a “better” outcome than others discussed here does not mean that outcome is likely to be “good.” In all scenarios, jihadists are likely to spread in Syria and humanitarian conditions will remain terrible for
the foreseeable future. Iran will continue to have destabilizing influence. Regional actors are deeply enmeshed and the possibility for political destabilization is high. In short, the stakes are high in Syria, and the deck is stacked against any productive resolution.

The likelihood of bad policy outcomes in Syria suggests a serious blow to American credibility in the region. Maintaining such credibility is clearly a U.S. interest, though it was not included formally in the analytical matrices of this paper because of the ambiguity associated with the notion of credibility. The reality today is that both international and American credibility have already been damaged as a result of the ongoing violence in Syria and Assad’s ability and willingness to continue massive human rights violations even in the face of international condemnation and sanctions.

Despite the terrible humanitarian, strategic, and reputational costs of Assad remaining in power, it is important not to assume that direct intervention to remove him—as was ultimately undertaken with Saddam Hussein—would result in a positive outcome. Despite intense domestic opposition to Saddam’s rule in Iraq and a decade of international condemnation of the Iraqi regime, the aftermath of regime change produced a terrible civil war and deeply damaged American credibility around the world. In fact, the legacy of that fight undermines American credibility for unilaterally pressuring Assad today.

Unfortunately, limited military intervention in Syria is not a strong policy option. Imposing a no-fly zone, for example, would be an extremely complex endeavor against Syria, which has a strong integrated air-defense system that includes both Iranian and Russian weapons. This distinguishes Syria from Libya, for example, in terms of the regime’s ability to counter and withstand a sustained no-fly zone.

The United States does have a capability to indirectly equip and train rebel groups in Syria. This option reduces the United States’ political exposure to the conflict while improving rebel capability, but it also creates a real possibility of blowback because of the uncertain loyalties of various rebel factions. Additionally, this represents entering into a de facto proxy war with Iran.

The three most salient preference structures prioritize limiting regional instability, containing Iran, and safeguarding chemical and biological weapons. As a result, the best outcome in Syria is a rebel victory that only would include indirect U.S. support. The United States should therefore provide training and assistance to rebel factions, but mitigate the possibility of blowback from jihadist-affiliated rebels by avoiding the temptation to supply poorly vetted rebel groups with a large amount of weapons. It should also utilize a range of diplomatic tools to pressure the Assad regime and support humanitarian efforts for refugees. This approach and goal is likely to contribute to a protracted conflict in Syria, though that is unlikely to be avoided in any scenario. It is likely that this policy option will not adequately protect all U.S. interests in Syria, nor will any other viable policy option. Regardless of U.S. policy, the situation in Syria is likely to be extremely violent and unstable for the foreseeable future.
2 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based on estimates as of July 10, 2012. Total estimated killed, 17,129.
3 This methodology crudely reflects the standard Multi-Attribute Making approach, a key benefit of which is that it allows for a structured comparison of scenarios in which U.S. interests are weighted differently. For example, some policymakers will prioritize containing Iran whereas others will be focused on the spread of jihadists or the humanitarian situation in Syria itself. For more on Multi-Attribute Decision Making see: Zachary F. Lansdowne “Ordinal Ranking Methods for Multicriterion Decision Making” Naval Research Logistics, Vol. 43, Issue 5
6 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman “Al-Qaeda’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2007
8 Laila Bassam “Hezbollah Says it Gets Support, not Orders, from Iran” Reuters February 17, 2012; Magnus Ranstorp, Hizballah in Lebanon (Palgrave-Macmillan. New York: 1997)
13 Michael Weiss “Assad could already be using chemical weapons in Syria, say reports. Meanwhile the country prepares to break up” The Telegraph, July 17, 2012
20 Esther Pan “Syria, Iran and the Mideast Conflict” Council on Foreign Relations, July 18, 2006
22 “Russia ready to seek consensus in UN on new resolution aimed at ending Syria’s civil war” Associated Press, July 17, 2012
23 “Erdogan Slams Assad for Killing Dozens ‘Every Day’” Reuters April 10, 2012; Sebnem Arsu “Turkish Premier
An increasingly stark sectarian dynamic in Syria is likely to increase cohesion among the Arab states, with the potential exception of Iraq. This fissure might even be highlighted by the fracturing of long-standing relationships, including Iran pulling support for Sunni militant groups such as HAMAS.


32 An important counter-argument is that a NATO intervention may stabilize the country (as in Bosnia, Kosovo, and the first part of the war in Afghanistan after 9/11), curb the killing of civilians, and limit both al-Qa’ida and Iranian influence.


34 Joel Hemming and Khaled Yacoub Weis “Syrian helicopter flights test Turkey’s wrath” *Reuters* July 2, 2012


36 Wladimir van Wilgenburg “Syrian Kurds try to Maintain Unity” *Rudaw* July 17, 2012

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