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Hillel Fradkin  
Lewis Libby

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1015 15th Street, NW  
6th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005  
[www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)

# **Playing Cards in Syria**

**By Hillel Fradkin and Lewis Libby**

**As the Syrian crisis enters its second year, Syrian President Bashir al Assad defies once confident predictions. Many had thought that he would fall easily, the next autocratic victim in this season of Arab revolts. In time, some attributed a lack of progress to the fear that dangerous Islamists might be poised to inherit Syria. But it is the contending strategic strengths and weaknesses of the forces within and around Syria that have combined to keep this crisis brewing for months to come.**

**Not long ago, UN envoy Kofi Annan, left Damascus to declare, “the transformational winds blowing today cannot long be resisted.” Now he brokers interim compromises that relieve pressure on Assad. Not so very long ago, the Arab league spoke with unexpected force to condemn Assad, then it scuttled back beneath the shelter of a Russian proposal. Soon it will meet in Baghdad, but there seems little pluck left in these and other so-**

**called “Friends of Syria” on which so many hopes has once been pinned.**

**In the meantime, Assad’s offensive against the main centers of Syrian revolt has proceeded cautiously, methodically, and so far successfully to reduce the rebel camps – in the case of Homs, literally to rubble.**

**The once-imagined glories of another Arab revolt have run into the strategic realities of Syria. They are unlike those of Egypt or Libya, to which it had been compared.**

**If Syria initially appeared as yet another instance of Arab discontent, Assad’s strategic strengths – his unstinting brutality, the strength of his base, and the staunch support of outside powers – make it different. Assad never shared Mubarak’s weaknesses or Qaddafi’s isolation. Assad follows his father as the proud slayer of Syrians. Shelling his own cities, after all, should be on the Assad family crest. Mubarak’s desire to anoint his son, who in turn had undermined the profitability of military-owned businesses, had alienated Egyptian generals. Syria’s Alawite officers, a minority in their own land, had fewer apparent options; empowering the Sunni masses of Syria would lead to retribution against their Shia off-**

shoot, Alawite clan. Mubarak's external ally, the United States, stayed Mubarak's hand in the name of Arab freedom. Qaddafi had no meaningful outside support. Assad's external allies, Iran and Russia, have no such qualms, feeding arms to Assad, instead.

Yes, Assad has his weaknesses. His small, minority Alawite clan, less than one-eighth of all Syrians, lacks the manpower to trade casualties with the rebels. So he fights his stand-off war of reduction, pounding cities from the outskirts, rather than pushing irreplaceable troops into the streets right away. Meanwhile, the rebels fight a long war of attrition, seeking to wear down the Alawites, while hoping that international pressures will limit the influx of Hezbollah and Iranian forces that might swell Assad's ranks. Libya taught Assad to worry about sanctuaries along his borders. The Turks and Iraqis could use their territory to bedevil him, as he had once done to them. So Assad prioritizes his attacks along his borders.

But geography generally favors Assad's tenacity. His Alawite base holds the majority in Syria's western regions of Latakia and Tartus. These lie along the Mediterranean and border Lebanon. They are a vital link to Iran's proxy Hezbollah, and they hold the

**Mediterranean ports that Russia covets. If there is a claim to interfere with oil and gas finds in the Mediterranean, it lies along this coast.**

**If Assad's Alawites lose their battle for the rest of Syria, their retreat would be into this Western enclave of Alawite majority. Syria might then fracture into one or two Sunni states around Damascus and Aleppo, and potentially as well into a Kurdish region in the Northeast. None of these parts could soon dislodge the Alawite's Mediterranean hold. This is the strategic safety net that has reassured Assad's Alawites and their external allies that all will not be lost. Iran's Ayatollahs, in particular, know well that the battle to preserve their interests in Hezbollah and Hamas is a critical part of their broader effort to drive the U.S. from the Middle East.**

**Meanwhile, the costs of intervention, the prospects of rump states of Syria, and the nature of the Syrian opposition chill Assad's external enemies. For all her bluster against the Russians and Chinese for putting their interests over their humanity, Secretary Clinton knows her own interests well. Early on in the Syrian revolt it was proposed that we call upon Assad to step down. At that time**

**Sec. of State Clinton demurred, arguing that Saudi and Turkish declarations would carry more weight. But as they – especially the Turks – hesitated, we went ahead. Now we limp along behind plans that offer Assad respite. From the corridors of the White House comes the word: no oil spikes or military interventions in an election year. Obama will run on moving U.S. troops out of Iraq, not on initiating U.S. attacks inside Syria.**

**For its part, Turkey, with its long border with Syria and its substantial military forces, would seem best positioned to stop Syria. Indeed, President Obama has fawned over Turkish President Erdogan, seeking to hitch our interests to his supposed regional influence. Erdogan, too, has blustered against Assad, and to bolster his bluff has cited Syria as a domestic issue in Turkey.**

**But Assad knows his enemies. Erdogan fears Assad driving more refugees, especially Kurds into Turkey; and he fears as well that a rump state of Syrian Kurdistan, to match the Kurdistan region in Iraq, might harden aspirations of independence among the Kurds of Anatolia. Kurdish violence within Turkey already threatens unity within Turkey, and Erdogan quite reasonably worries about increased Syrian and Iranian support to the Kurdish**

**PKK terrorist group inside Turkey. Within two to three decades, the ethnic Kurd population will be growing faster than Turks within Turkey. Turks face the longer-term prospect of being a diminished force in the land they first conquered a thousand years ago, and they have not been kind to the ethnic Kurds who would challenge them. Erdogan publicly laments this growing problem and campaigned on healing the rift between Turks and their Kurd minority. But his promises have ominously fallen flat. So he would not welcome more Kurds, nor their political empowerment. This helps explain why Turkey has so far publicly taken a pass on the Syrian crisis, claiming -- as it reiterated last week -- that "outside intervention" is unnecessary and repugnant. Events in Syria may yet provoke Turkey out of this crouch, but months of only bluff and bluster are even then likely to ensue. Assad knows the reluctance of his foes.**

**Israel bears no love for Assad, proxy of their enemies in Tehran. But the Israelis fear that the radical Sunnis who might come to rule Damascus in the absence of Assad would undermine the Hashimite king in Jordan, the one remaining, stable border Israel has. The Israelis have reason to worry, too, that an active**

**American role on the Syrian front might relieve our focus on their greater goal: defanging a potentially nuclear Iran.**

**Who remains? Only the Saudis currently lean forward to help the Sunni uprising in Syria. The Saudis, once angered by the Syrian role in the assassination of long-time Saudi friend, Rafiq Harriri of Lebanon, had made their peace with the Assads. It is not a love of democratic freedoms that drives them forward, but the prospect of striking at Iran. And so they have called directly for arming the Syrian opposition and are likely will increasingly take steps to that end. However, should they glance back over their shoulder, they may chance to see that Turkey and the U.S. have for now shifted to looking at their feet.**

**And so the “Friends of Syria” shuffle uneasily toward a day when Assad’s demise seems once again far off and the world’s attention moves on to other illusions. Meanwhile, Russia, Iran, and Assad take pause to plot. One wonders what the Syrian opposition must make of their changing fate.**

**Syria remains a battleground in two wars – a low grade war between Sunni and Shia Iran, and a one-sided war between Iran and U.S. One-sided, because the U.S. has chosen to absorb blows**



**rather than respond. Thus far it is a defensive battle that Iran is surviving; its proxy hangs on. On a larger scale, Iran's resilience in Syria, with Russian and Chinese support, cannot help but encourage Iran in its broader struggle to be the dominant force in the region.**

**In this and other conflicts the Obama administration would like to think that there is a low cost "win/win" solution just around the corner. But the present conflict has only a "win/lose" resolution – Assad stays or goes. Iran and its proxies are not about to abandon this battle yet. Unfortunately, seeking a near term solution to this dilemma entails prospects of taking stands and incurring costs that the U.S. Administration has been unwilling to face.**

**Meanwhile, Assad and his supporters know that they still have cards to play.**

**XXX**